

BACK TO VILLAGES: A MARXIST FEMINISM ANALYSIS OF  
RETURNED LEFT-BEHIND WOMEN'S PERSPECTIVES OF  
SOCIAL REPRODUCTION IN CHINA

a thesis presented by

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## **Abstract**

This research explores women's perspectives on social reproduction amid their return from the rural-urban labor migration destination to villages in China. In the background that migrant workers have already contributed greatly to China's rapid development, returned left-behind women's efforts and contributions in terms of social reproduction should be uncovered and highlighted as well.

The research findings are built upon unstructured interviews with 15 returned left-behind women from 7 provinces that I reached out to via TikTok. It explores women's changes upon activities and attitudes, emotions and behaviors, responsibilities and relationships around social reproduction amid the return. Through the lens of a Marxist feminism theory, Social Reproduction Theory, this research tries to understand how these women are placed in labor migration under the system of the market economy. It reveals how women's perspectives on social reproductive work differs after they return to the home village from working in cities as migrant laborers. This research presents the dilemma of women from the lower class in labor migration and documented their interactions inside the household and the society, expanding current study of Marxist feminism and Chinese labor migration.

Key words: returned left-behind women, social reproduction, labor migration, China

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## Chapter 1 Introduction: Rural Women in China's Internal Labor Migration

“I used to work in the city. It wasn't long before  
I got married and came back.”

Biao, January 10<sup>th</sup> 2021

### China's internal labor migration

Over the past decades, we have witnessed a rapid economic development of China (see Figure 1). In 2020, Gross Development of Production already hit 14 trillion US dollars, while 40 years ago, it was about 191 billion US dollars. The impressive achievement of China's rapid economic development has attracted many scholars to demystify and explain the reasons. The demographic dividend is one of the main reasons for China's economic miracle (S. Zhang, Liu, & Huang, 2021). Benefiting from sufficient and cheap migrant labor in the market, after Reform and Opening (改革开放) in 1978<sup>1</sup>, millions of manufacturing factories emerged and quickly lighted up the map of the coastal areas and others. Gradually, China has become the well-known world's factory (K. W. Chan, 2012). In the other words, large-scale rural-urban labor migration has contributed a lot to China's economy (C. K.-C. Chan, Ngai, & Chan, 2010; Lee, 1995; P. Li & Li, 2007).

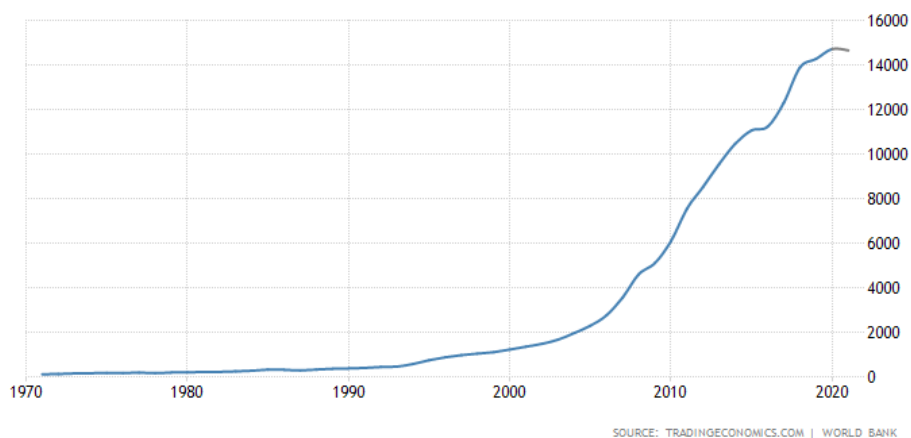


Figure 1 GDP development of China (World Bank)

Until 2020, according to the *Migrant Workers Monitor Report* from National Bureau of Statistics of China (2021), over 285 million migrant workers worked in urban areas, accounting for over 20% of the Chinese population. They migrated from rural areas to urban areas, from developing areas (middle and western China) to relatively developed areas (eastern China, especially coastal areas) (Y. Zhang, 2019). Migrant workers are active in the manufacturing, construction, service industry. In manufacturing, they use their hands to make clothes that are

<sup>1</sup> China transformed its economic system, from planned economy to market economy, after Reform and Opening. More information can be found: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese\\_economic\\_reform](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_economic_reform)

sold all over the world. Working in construction, they have built countless Chinese facilities, from skyscrapers to residential buildings, railways to airports. In the service industry, some workers are delivery men/women, some are waiters/waitresses in restaurants, and some are domestic workers. No matter what industry they work in, there is no doubt that they are still making great contributions to China's economy until today.



Figure 2 Migrant workers of China Railway Group Limited (Male workers were dressed orange and female worker was dressed yellow. Resource: <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/PSTe6J2W89PmJO7dHhYglg>)

### Labor migration and *hukou*

When discussing labor migration of China, it is inevitable to introduce China's *hukou* (户口 population registration system), because *hukou* has caused many problems within labor migration such as violation of labor rights, and inequality between the urban and rural populations in urban areas (K. Chan, 2009; Pun & Lu, 2010; Stainback & Tang, 2019; Xiang, 2007). In this section, I will briefly review the entanglement between China's *hukou* and labor migration.

At the beginning of the founding of the People's Republic of China, China established a population registration system, dividing all population into two categories, *nongye hukou* (农业户口 people holding rural registration) and *feinongye hukou* (非农业户口 people holding urban registration) in order to manage population under the system of the planned economy. Civil Affairs Bureaus in China would register newborn babies to rural registration or urban registration according to their birthplace and the registration types of their parents. Initially, the original intention of establishing *hukou* was to better distribute means of living and social resources in the whole society. In this case, a strong regulation to control population mobility and to manage population was needed. The rural population is well located in rural areas, owning certain areas of land, they can use it to plant crops, for instance. Correspondently,

people holding urban registration lived in cities and they worked in stated own corporates via formal contract but unlike people with rural registration, they did not have the right to access land. Due to strict regulation, it was difficult for rural people to move to cities unless they had urban employment contracts or obtained permission from relevant departments (K. Chan, 2009).

Later, after China's Reform and Opening in 1978, China opened the door to accept capital investments from other countries, shifting the planned economy to a market economy. The coastal areas firstly accepted a large amount of capital investment (Child, 1996). The economy developed rapidly, and it created a large number of labor demands for development needs (Fang, Yang, & Meiyan, 2009). In the course of this, on the one hand, the government started to relieve the policies on controlling population mobility and allowed the rural population to go to urban areas to make a living (Cui & Cohen, 2015). On the other hand, due to the relatively low income from farming, a large number of farmers gave up farming, left their homes, and worked in cities (Xu et al., 2015). As the scale of migrant workers has become larger and larger, China's government and scholars have realized that it was urged to transform the original population mobility regulation in order to feed the labor demand in urban areas. Even though over the past decades, China's government has modified *hukou* regulation plenty of times and the social resources allocation system rooted in that, but the systematic obstacles of labor migration have not been completely finished yet (K. W. Chan & Buckingham, 2008; Cui & Cohen, 2015). As a result, a series of problems in China's labor migration continues to exist (Song, 2014; Wong, Li, & Song, 2007).

*Hukou* makes the social resources in the city still inclined to the urban population, and the migrant workers with rural registration become marginalized in the city (Wong et al., 2007; X. Wu, 2019). Employers might take advantage of the weakness of migrant workers, like under-educated and weak legal knowledge which were the result of the unequal development between rural and urban, to encroach on the legitimate rights and interests of migrant workers. For example, many employers will not provide workers with complete social insurance applicable to the urban welfare system and sign illegal labor contracts with migrant workers (Müller, 2016; Y. Zhang, 2019). Moreover, the phenomenon of difficult rights protection of migrant workers is still a major crux of labor rights protection<sup>2</sup>. Meanwhile, it is hard for migrant workers to transfer into urban registration unless they meet the specific complicated requirements of their targeted city (L. Li, Li, & Chen, 2010). This series of problems directly or indirectly lead to labor migration, which is usually temporary.

### **The return of female migrant workers and social reproduction**

In the study of Chinese labor migration, in addition to the above-mentioned research on the population registration system, marginalization of migrant workers in urban and labor rights issues, there is another social phenomenon that has attracted the attention of scholars, that is,

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<sup>2</sup> For this, more information can be found on the website of CHINA LABOUR BULLETIN (an NGO in Hong Kong). It recorded cases about violence of labor rights. See link: <https://clb.org.hk/>



the gender issues in labor migration. Among so many migrant workers, only about 35% are women, according to the monitor report.

Why are there fewer women among labor migration? First, family members of female migrant workers will recall them to the village to take care of elderly family members (Chuang, 2016; W. W. Wang & Fan, 2006). Second, some people will return to the countryside after marriage, move to their husbands' homes and take over household and agricultural work, so as to provide family support for their husbands and enable their husbands to continue to work in the city (Chuang, 2016; Ye, Wu, Rao, Ding, & Zhang, 2016). And, considering the education of future children, they will choose to return to the countryside. The main reason is that the cost of education of rural children who live in urban areas is higher than that of children holding urban registration. Even if the children of migrant workers are born in the city, they still would be registered as rural registration because their parents are holding that, which determines that the children cannot smoothly access public education compared with the children with urban registration (Wong et al., 2007; Zhou & Wang, 2016). In short, first, because women will be expected to complete what scholars call social reproductive work, such as taking care of the elderly and providing family support (cleaning, washing...), women have finally returned to the countryside. Second, due to *hukou* it is difficult for women to resettle herself and her children's life and education in the city, women return to the countryside. For these reasons, countless female migrant workers walk in the opposite direction in China's rural-urban labor migration and eventually return to the countryside.

In fact, the social relations and systems related to the activities mentioned above (marriage, childbirth, cleaning, washing, providing care, etc.) are collectively referred to as social reproduction. Accordingly, activities, social relations, and institutions related to the production of goods or services are production (Bhattacharya, 2017c). Social reproduction or production? This is a "harsh choice" for female migrant workers with limited time and energy in China's current market economy (Cook & Dong, 2011). In the existing literatures, we can actually draw a conclusion that among labor immigrants, a force called "social reproduction" is pulling women back to the countryside. It is this force that once made H. Wu and Ye (2016) sighed that left behind women "pay a heavy price for the development in China". In order to further reveal the relationship between "heavy price" in migration and social reproduction, in my research, I will pay attention to the left-behind women with migration history, so as to understand the efforts and contributions of these women in China's development and its pillar--labor migration.

### **Studying social reproduction from women's perspectives**

Motivated by exploring women's contributions, I was interested in exploring how they interpret changes in terms of social reproduction within the return. At the same time, because some researchers argued that after rural women migrate to the urban, they were exposed to a modern gender ideology. As a result, they would change more or less their gender ideology. For instance, they might be inclined to pursue the freedom of marriage. In tradition, parents would arrange marriage to their daughters (Gaetano, 2008). I would like to see if my interviewees also showed a change in terms of gender ideology as well, specifically to see if they would also have any

change in their perspectives of social reproduction, such as the gender labor division inside the household. Also, it is interesting to see how they re-embed to rural life. Thus, I formed the main research question and three sub-questions:

How does rural-urban migration influence returned left-behind women's perspectives of social reproduction?

- 1) What changes have taken place in the content and attitudes of women's social reproduction work after the return?
- 2) What are their emotions when doing social reproduction work? How did they react in behavior?
- 3) How do they understand social reproduction responsibilities and the relationships involved?

I named my research population returned left-behind women, referring to two main characteristics of these women. The first characteristic is that women returned to villages after working and living in urban areas for a few years. The second characteristic is that women are now left behind in labor migration, their husbands are still in urban areas. Besides, in order to emphasize the focus of my research, I used the concept, perspectives of social reproduction, to highlight that my interest is to explore how women interpret social reproduction amid their return from urban to rural, including women's understanding of activities and attitudes, emotions and affected behaviors, interpretation to responsibilities of social reproduction and their relationships with family members and external social relations (Laslett & Brenner, 1989, p. 384).

I selected Marxist feminism, Social Reproduction Theory (SRT), as a lens to understand women's experience and their perception (Bhattacharya, 2017c). It is a theory for researchers to look into women's dilemma in the field of feminism studies, which refers to women's plight in terms of social reproduction and production due to gender, class, race and other factors underneath capitalism and it would further lead to women's oppression in society (Bhattacharya, 2017b). The main arguments of this theory are followed. First, this theory compares capitalism with a huge machine. And the operation of this machine relies on both production and social reproduction. In the past, traditional Marxism took commodity as the center of its analysis, making scholars and the public attach too much attention to production. Producing goods and services, for capitalists, is essential. But for them, it is also essential to ensure that the labor power is reproduced because labor power is the recourse of surplus-value and capital accumulation. Social reproduction supports labor to reproduce themselves and the next generation of labor and maintaining of the elderly. Therefore, for the perpetuation of capitalism, we must recognize social reproduction is as important as production (Bhattacharya, 2017a). Second, SRT provides a lens to think about how gender and class intertwine in capitalism. Because in the context of China, race, and ethnicity are not the main factors that function in women's dilemma, I would only give attention to class and gender. SRT requires us to think about the gender division underneath these two spheres. Currently, in society, most of

the social reproductive works are done by the female (Ji, Wu, Sun, & He, 2017; Koster, Poortman, van der Lippe, & Kleingeld, 2021; M. S. Luo & Chui, 2018; Qi & Dong, 2016). In terms of class, women from distinct classes experience differently. Bourgeois women can hire domestic workers to help them out at home but women from the lower class (returned left-behind women in my research) cannot afford this kind of service. They have to deal with this kind of dilemma by themselves. So, compared to bourgeois women, they are more vulnerable in social reproduction and production (Federici, 2012). Through the lens of SRT, I am able to understand the research population's position in China's labor migration. As they are from the lower class and female, they might have their own particular stories towards social reproduction from their own perspectives.

I designed qualitative research for my study. Due to COVID-19, I had to do research online. Using purpose sampling, I accessed 15 returned left-behind women via TikTok at the end of 2020, and then I conducted unstructured interviews with women during January and February of 2021. My informants were from various provinces of China (see Figure 3), including Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, Hubei, Hebei, Henan, Jiangsu, Guizhou, and Guangdong. A list of interviewees and their basic information can be found in Annex 3.



Figure 3 Map of the locations of informants

### Women's changes before and after the return

Before my informants migrated back to villages, most of them worked in factories as factory girls (except Ba and Jia<sup>3</sup>). They stayed in urban areas for a few years. Among them, informants named Ba once stayed in Guangzhou, Guangdong province for the longest time, nearly 10 years. Some other women, like Zhu, on average stayed in urban areas for just 2 or 3 years.

<sup>3</sup> I marked the name(s) in brackets to indicate citation of the content of the interview.

When they were in urban, they rent a room nearby (e.g., Zhong, Zhu, Xu) or just lived in dormitories of the factories (e.g., Yue, Ye, Biao). For them, in urban areas, they put their mind on working. They worked 8 or more hours in the daytime, such as assembling digital devices (Ye) and sewing shoes (Xu). Even though the wage is not that high, it can support their daily expenditures in urban areas. At that time, after work, they have a few hours to chill out. Reproductive works, like watching TV series, playing with mates, reading digital novels, made them feel relaxed. However, this kind of life did not last that long.

Years after the first entry to urban areas, some women met men they loved in the cities that they worked in (Yuan, Xia, Ba, Ling). Some women knew men after the introduction from marriage matchmakers in their villages and then fell in love with them (Er, Zhu, Zhong, Ju, Youer). Yue was recalled to getting married and having a baby. For her family, Yue's mission of being a rural woman is to get married and to have babies as soon as possible. For her dad and mom, working in the urban was wasting Yue's youth. In addition to Yue, other women moved back to the villages after getting married and having babies. Marriage and having babies sound quite natural for women. But for my informants, they did do the choice, being wife and mom or being wage labor in urban. Moving back was the outcome of careful consideration. Moving back can reduce the living cost (Zhu, Er, Ba). They moved into husbands' house to offer help to husbands' families. They did not want their babies to be left-behind children so they decided to stay in villages and accompanied children (Zhong, Xia, Ba).

At this point, the previous description was just the prelude to their stories. After return, the plot of their stories then became more fruitful and vivid. More tasks, little play! They got more reproductive tasks to finish and less time to recreate themselves. Housework has been more complicated and they were sick of day-by-day repeated tasks. In spite of this, women who want to earn money could achieve that as some women got support from their parents-in-law (e.g., Ba, Biao, Xia), and educational institutions also helped them to take care of their children in the daytime (Yuan, Ju). New technology, TikTok, also has made them possible to earn money at home (Xu, Xiao, Jia, Ba). Attitudes of providing care to parents-in-law have already shown women's contradiction to the elder generation. In fact, whether parents-in-law were enlightened and whether women could pass over some conflicts with their parents-in-law would have an impact on women's attitudes towards providing care to the elderly. Without a doubt, some parents-in-law are nice. Whereas some parents-in-law cannot empathize with or recognize women's effort to the household and parents-in-law would express their dissatisfaction to my informants. Also, in the course of exploring their emotions, behavior, and relationships inside the household. We can more directly see the dynamic and tangling of two forces. One is women's more independent and modern ideology, the other one is the elder ideology carried by in-laws. The house became the arena for this sort of interaction. Women would feel annoying; women would feel anger. They compromised; they struggled; they stayed away from the issues that they could not tolerate anymore. But some women would be thankful to their parents-in-law (Biao, Xia); some women were treated as in-laws' biological family members (Er). When they were taking care of their children, love was always in a dominant position although they got irritated by naughty children sometimes. The pull and push inside the household vividly

showed women's relationship with their in-laws and how women re-embed to rural life.

### **Structure of the report**

In the body chapters of this research report, readers will be first exposed to the theoretical framework of this research. After that, I will elaborate my how I designed my research, collected and analyzed data. Next, you can find detailed elaboration on my research findings, based on the data that I collected during fieldwork. Each chapter is correspondent to the distinct sub-research question. Chapter 4 focused on women's change in terms of social reproductive activities and their attitudes on those works. And then in Chapter 5, I presented a few cases about women's emotions when they were doing certain social reproductive works and how their behaviors responded to various emotions. And then In Chapter 6, I will state how women understood the responsibilities of social reproduction and how they interpreted the relationships both inside and outside the household. At last, I placed my research in the debates of relevant research fields.

## Chapter 2 Theoretical Framework: Social Reproduction Theory

### Introduction

How does the experience of migration affect women's perspectives of social reproduction? That is the research problem I want to solve via this research. Returned left-behind women's identity defined that Social Reproduction Theory is appropriate as a theoretical framework to analyze China's material reality in labor migration. First, they are from the lower class in China's class stratification. Second, they are female. More essentially, they were once active in China's labor migration destinations and they currently are still active, although they are on the sending side. More abstractly, they are deeply tangling in China's market economy. Social Reproduction Theory, as a Marxism feminism theory, is able to provide me a theoretical perspective to explore both gender and class in the current China market economy or China's capitalism in the other words.

In the first section, I will provide a further detailed explanation of the key concepts of my research. And then in the second section, I justified the appropriateness of Social Reproduction Theory. To achieve that, firstly, I introduced the main arguments of Social Reproduction Theory and elaborated why SRT but not the other feminism theory, namely intersectionality, is appropriate to my research context. At last, I elaborated on how I will get into my research through the lens of Social Reproduction Theory.

### Key concepts of the research

In this section, I will declare the key concepts of my research. They are returned left-behind women, perspectives of social reproduction. It helps to concisely refer to the research scope and what exactly I am studying.

#### *Concept 1: Returned left-behind women*

My research focuses on rural women who returned to the village after working in the urban areas whereas their husbands are migrant workers in the urban areas. I need a term to concisely refer to my research population. For this, I introduced a new term, returned left-behind women to refer them.

I borrowed the word "returned" from "returned population/migrant workers", referring to people who return to villages after working in urban areas for years (Feng, Li, Yan, Feng, & Xia, 2015; Han, 2020; L. Zhang, Liu, Zhang, & Wu, 2015). I borrowed "left-behind" from the other term "left-behind population", referring to those who are stayed back in villages in rural-urban migration (Choithani, 2020; Desai & Banerji, 2008; Fernández-Sánchez, Salma, Márquez-Vargas, & Salami, 2020; C. Luo, Yang, Li, & Feldman, 2017; Ye et al., 2016). Because neither left-behind women nor returned women could concisely refer to my research population, I introduce a new term as the first key concept of my research, that is returned left-behind women.

**Concept 2: Perspectives of social reproduction**

I identified the second key concept of my research as the perspectives of social reproduction. Using the perspectives of social reproduction rather than social reproduction as the key concept is for emphasizing the focus of my research is women's intimate interpretations and feelings towards social reproduction, including, "the activities and attitudes, behaviors and emotions, responsibilities and relationships directly involved in the maintenance of life on the daily basis, and intergenerationally (Laslett & Brenner, 1989, p. 382)."

Current research around three dimensions of social reproduction to explore women's perspectives has been unfolded a bit but they were scattered. Scholars used terms like "unpaid work" (Cook & Dong, 2011; Hoskyns & Rai, 2007; Qi & Dong, 2016), "unpaid caring work" (Tasnim, 2020; UN Women, 2020) in order to discuss the value of social reproductive works and argue value of these works has been hidden for a long time. When it came to attitudes, scholars discussed, for example, women from different social stratifications would perceive differently and whether women like to do social reproductive works (Oakley, 2018). Oakley (2018) also captured and documented women's emotions and behaviors when they did different kinds of works. Moreover, some scholars liked to study women's feelings over gender labor division inside the household (Lennon & Rosenfield, 1994). In addition, some scholars have begun to dive into the relationships, both macro and micro. In the field of labor migration, Shah and Lerche (2020) have studied the support from kinship networks inside the household for seasonal migrant workers in India. Hopkins (2017) and Vilog and Picos III (2021) have witnessed the emotional comfort of friendship and communities for cross-border domestic workers.

Again, although various studies have, to some extent, involved three main dimensions of social reproduction, but were unfolded in a general and unthorough way. While in my research, with the definition from Laslett and Brenner (1989), I developed a more comprehensive and stereoscopic image about returned left-behind women's position in China's labor migration.

**Social Reproduction Theory (SRT)**

In the global, unpaid domestic work had gained considerable attention after an international feminist movement, Wages for Housework (WfH), from the early 1970s (Federici, 2012; Toupin, 2018). The movement Wage for Housework aims to call for attention to efforts of women in the private sphere and attack the idea of taking women doing housework for granted. "I should add that wages for housework never simply meant a paycheck (p.58)", Federici (2012) wrote in her book *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle*. Again, the purpose is to make more people realize and recognize the value of social reproduction and then ultimately enhance the socioeconomic status of women and relieve their stress in the reproduction sphere.

Nowadays, Marxist feminism scholar, Tithi Bhattacharya, leads the current conversations and theoretical development work of Social Reproduction Theory. In 2017, Bhattacharya edited a

collection of essays about Social Reproduction Theory. In this collection, *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*, she and many other social reproduction theorists contributed to SRT. I took this book as a primary reference to review the SRT, and some other pieces of Marxism and Marxist feminism readings also help.

### *Arguments of SRT*

The most fundamental proposal of SRT is that capitalism perpetuation relies on both social reproduction and production (Bezanson & Luxton, 2006; Bhattacharya, 2017b; Ferguson & McNally, 2013). In Marxism, labor power is the resource of capital accumulation. By exploiting labor power, capitalists can obtain surplus value as much as possible for ultimately maintaining or increasing capital accumulation (Marx, Engels, Mandel, & Fowkes, 1990). To guarantee a continuous supply of labor power, capitalists rely on the bearers of labor power to recreate their labor power so that they can go back to the workplaces energetically and reproduce the next generation of workers. Capitalists are able to continuously gain endless interests by exploiting the continuously reproducing working class (Bhattacharya, 2017a). In traditional Marxism, it places commodities (i.e., goods) and labor that produce commodities as the center of its debate. However, Marxist feminists argued that the Marxism debates should also attach some attention to the “unique commodity (i.e., labor power)<sup>4</sup>” and labor that produce the labor power. Both kinds of labor provide fuel to the operation of capitalism (Ferguson, 2016).

Social reproduction theorists then encouraged people to think about the gender division underneath these two spheres (Bakker, 2007; Bargawi, Alami, & Ziada, 2021; Brenner & Laslett, 1991; Laslett & Brenner, 1989). Currently, in society, most of the social reproductive works are done by the female. Nevertheless, in the production sphere, both women and men are encouraged to work as wage labor. Although these days, more men have begun to act actively in the sphere of reproduction, the gender gap in the labor division is still large (Evans, 2016). Double burdens have put women in a disadvantageous position in society. For example, tons of housework make women exhausted (H. Wu & Ye, 2016). Unstable employment due to pregnancy or less energy for work, employers tend to offer shorter-term contracts to women than men (Gore & LeBaron, 2019). Scholars name these issues--women’s oppression (Vogel, 1983).

Except for gender and social reproduction, we must also consider the other ingredient of capitalism, namely class (Bhattacharya, 2017a; Luxton, 2006). Working-class women would experience differently in social reproduction compared with bourgeois women. As Hopkins (2017) described in her writing, bourgeois women can hire domestic workers from the lower class to help them out in the sphere of social reproduction, especially by doing household chores. However, the income of working-class women is so low that they cannot afford the cost of hiring a domestic worker. Therefore, in front of the double burden, bourgeois women have

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<sup>4</sup> Workers sell their labor power to capitalists to earn wages. Hence labor power is the unique community.



more capability to handle it easily. However, working-class women are much more vulnerable. Then it makes sense if you see the scene that working-class women quit their jobs after giving birth to a baby. Or after work, working-class women work overtime at night after finishing housework as they need more money to support the daily expenditure.

### ***SRT or Intersectionality?***

In feminism studies, intersectionality is the other popular approach for scholars to understand women's oppression. Intersectionality advocates that the oppression suffered by women is the result of several intersecting forces. Through an intersectionality lens, scholars can explain how and why various forces (gender, race, ethnicity, etc.) attribute to women's oppression (McNally, 2017). Social reproduction theory, however, criticizes intersectionality through a historical materialist perspective. Social reproduction theorists argue that intersectionality cannot explain the origins of the various forces, and why and how the forces function in oppressed people based on the specific social formations. On the contrary, SRT, described as "an historical materialist analysis", allows researchers to explain the oppression of women in a particular historical context (Ferguson, 2021). Social reproduction theory fills this theoretical gap in intersectional feminism (Ferguson, 2021). It views capitalism as a totality and labor as "a diverse unity"<sup>5</sup> (multi-gendered, multiracial, multiethnic, etc.) that supports the regeneration of this totality, thus bringing together the forces that contribute to women's oppression into an organic whole (Ferguson, 2016). Social reproduction theorists reject the simple aggregation of forces, as what intersectionality claims (Bhattacharya, 2017b).

Intersectionality might be helpful if the concentration of my research is to compare how women from distinct classes/races/ethnics interpret social reproduction differently in a certain period. However, in terms of gender, race, class, ethnic, based on my knowledge about China, when I selected the theory, I assumed that my informants would mainly Han ethnic, which accounting for 91.11% of Chinese people<sup>6</sup>. And China does not take considerable immigration, so it is a mainly single race country. As a theory that abides by the principles of historical materialism, SRT is precisely suitable for exploring perceptual changes caused by temporal and spatial changes (i.e., rural-urban migration).

### ***Through the lens of SRT***

The definition of social reproduction inspired me to understand women's perspectives of social reproduction from different aspects, including activities, attitudes, emotions, behaviors, responsibilities, relationships (Laslett & Brenner, 1989); Through this research, I have a chance to hear the intimate voices from their hearts. For instance, how do they interpret their

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<sup>5</sup> Ferguson, 2016, p. 61.

<sup>6</sup> China's population consists of 56 ethnic groups. The Han (汉族) population is 1286.31 million, accounting for 91.11%; The population of ethnic minorities, such as Yao (瑶族), Zhuang (壮族), Yi (彝族), Dai (傣族), is 125.47 million, accounting for 8.89%. Data resource: The Seventh National Census, 2021, [http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/zxfb/202105/t20210510\\_1817176.html](http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/zxfb/202105/t20210510_1817176.html)

responsibilities in the sphere of social reproduction and their role in the household? Is there any difference between the interpretation before and after migration? What are their attitudes towards social reproduction? When they are/were doing some social reproductive works, how do/did they feel towards the tasks? How did they deal with different feelings amid social reproduction?

By exploring how migration experience influences their perspectives, SRT as a lens, I can study women's different experiences alongside the change of their class identity. In China, scholars identified migrant workers as semi-proletariat because they worked in the urban as waged labor, simultaneously their ownerships of land<sup>7</sup> were not be deprived due to the migration. Namely, they are not 100 percent reliant on selling labor power to the capitalists to earn life, they own a certain amount of means of production in the rural areas. When they returned to the villages, they restore to the peasant class and they can use the land to earn life if they like. They could do farming for self-consumption. They could also plant some crops for sale, or do breeding in the backyard (Huang & Ng, 2021; Pun & Lu, 2010). Even though, they are vulnerable in society and have access to means of production in rural areas, the fact is that they, as peasants, they are in lower class in discourse (X. Wu, 2019). SRT provides me a framework to place these rural women in Chinese capitalism to reflect how they perceived social reproduction as their identity change and their experience as women from lower class.

The SRT also inspired me to see how these women interpret their gender identity (as a female) in the realm of social reproduction and production in China, especially their ideas about the division of labor and gender ideology. In terms of the labor division, I can explore how they arrange works inside and outside the family to maintain the good operation of the households. In terms of gender ideology, I can explore whether the relatively more modern gender ideology in the urban would influence women's perspectives towards labor division in social reproduction. And I also want to know how they re-adapt and re-embed to the rural gender ideology after the return.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, through this theoretical framework, I was able to understand women's perspectives of social reproduction in capitalism and their experiences in the entanglement of capital, class and gender alongside migration.

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<sup>7</sup> Rural registered people have the right to use and manage a piece of land that located in villages.

## Chapter 3 Data and Methods

### Introduction

My research aims to explain how migration experience have an impact on returned left-behind women's perspectives of social reproduction. Through exploring their interpretation of activities and attitudes, behaviors and emotions, responsibilities and relationships, I formulated an image about their perception, and ultimately called for more people attach attention to women's position in social reproduction. I conducted qualitative research to collect data and generate my answers to the research questions. It has a considerable strength that I could dig into women's more realistic interpretation towards social reproduction and it allowed me to better describe their current conditions and their transformation alongside the migration (Anderson, 2010).

I started to plan my research in 2020, the year the Covid-19 pandemic spread over the world. I originally conceived of conducting on-site fieldwork in one specific village of China. However, it was impossible to carry out on-site fieldwork, influenced by travel restrictions over the world. As the circumstance, I had to consider doing research online, including accessing research populations, building rapport, and conducting interviews online. In the middle of 2020, my supervisor of course *Cutting Edge Issues in Development and Rural Innovation*, Dr. Pieter de Vries, once recommended my group an open-access Google document, named *Doing Fieldwork in a Pandemic* (Lupton, 2021) as a guideline for us to do research online. This document was initialed by Australian sociologist, Deborah Lupton. This document helped me to adjust my fieldwork strategies and inspired me to research more smartly and flexibly.

In this chapter, I elaborated on the research methodologies of my research. At the very beginning, I explained why and how I carried out purposive sampling to access my informants via TikTok. Second, I justified the data collection process, such as when, how, where, who, and why. Then we went through the data analysis process. After that, I gave an explanation about how I managed the data. In the end, my research positionality followed.

### Data collection

As the very first step of my fieldwork, I had to access some returned left-behind women online. I used the App-based Method from that guideline document to get into the online community of my research population. To my knowledge to Chinese popular social medias, I identified that Weibo<sup>8</sup> and TikTok<sup>9</sup> were two platforms for me to access some informants because I could use the search internal function to filter out part of the content with keywords like “留守妇女 (*liushoufunv*, left-behind women)” and “农村留守妇女 (*nongcunliushoufunv*, rural

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<sup>8</sup> Weibo is a Twitter like social media Application in China. More information can be found via Wikipedia link: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sina\\_Weibo](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sina_Weibo)

<sup>9</sup> More information are available in J. Wang, Shen, and Hong (2020).

left-behind women)”<sup>10</sup>, helping me to initially identify which users might be returned left-behind women. Until July 10th 2020, in TikTok, videos with the topic “left-behind women” were played a total of 380 million times, and then the topic “rural left-behind women” with round 23 million views was followed. However, on Weibo, far fewer posts or short videos were found<sup>11</sup>. Moreover, TikTok has one the other advantage. I can interact with my potential informants by leaving comments below their videos or in the live streaming virtual room (Divya, Manzoor, & Junaid, 2020; Southerton, 2020). For the above two advantages, I decided to access some returned left-behind women via TikTok.

After confirming the Application for searching for potential informants, then I moved to the next step, sampling. I chose purposive sampling which is a sampling technique that refers to researchers going to a community or getting close to a specific group of the population on purpose. It could help researchers to collect sufficient data for further refinement and clarification (Polkinghorne, 2005; Tongco, 2007). In my case, there was an online community of left-behind women in TikTok. I found that these women like to record their daily life and post short videos on TikTok. Other left-behind women would interact with others by leaving comments below videos, hitting like bottom, following a lot of mates. I registered my individual TikTok account around June 2020 so that I could get started to approach their community.

Furthermore, since the TikTok community of left-behind women was so giant, I had to target the potential informants and successfully invited them to participate in my research. To achieve my purpose, I broke down this task into several steps. The first step was to target the accessible population, who were active users in TikTok. If I randomly targeted anyone who has ever used the hashtag #left-behindwomen in a video on TikTok, the chances of getting a response would be slim. The reason was that some of them might have already deleted TikTok from their smartphones. In this case, it was essential to identify the accessible population, those who still used TikTok.

After users search for keywords on TikTok, TikTok will push related videos to users in a comprehensive sorting based on its algorithm<sup>12</sup>. This kind of sorting method did not help me to identify the accessible population. When I searched #left-behindwomen, the videos at the top were left-behind-women-related video clips uploaded by an editing company. I shifted it to chronological sorting, then the videos sticking at the top would be videos just posted minutes ago by women. During June to December 2020, I followed 156 accessible users in total.

After that, I further identified who has the migration experience. As I knew their community

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<sup>10</sup> I did not use the keyword “返乡 (*fanxiang*, returned)” to search for potential informants. The main reason is that in Chinese people’s daily dialogue, including the official or unofficial media, the word “returned” is almost only used to describe the scene of migrant workers returning home for the Spring Festival (Chinese New Year) every year. On the contrary, those two key words that I used for searching potential candidates have already been widely used in media and official documents, also women would use those terms to refer themselves.

<sup>11</sup> I did not record the accurate number of views of #left-behindwomen in Weibo on July 10<sup>th</sup> 2020. I just checked the number of this topic; it was viewed 146 thousand times. (Data from: 14<sup>th</sup> September, 2021)

<sup>12</sup> The reference of this is the official video created by TikTok. Link: <http://v.TikTok.com/dkXoRMd/>

better, I noticed that some women would do live streaming in TikTok. During the live streaming, sometimes women would mention events that happened in the past and share individual stories with their followers. When they shared their stories that related to the migration experience, I was able to identify they were the potential informants. The other strategy is to review the videos that they posted on TikTok before, some might post videos to compare the current life with the life in the urban area. When I knew someone was returned left-behind women, I then add their TikTok usernames to my notebook.

The next step was to build rapport with these potential informants. I once tried to directly send the interview invitation to a few women, but I did not get a response from them. I realized that sending the interview invitation before initialing the rapport was a bit sudden. Lessons were learned, and I adjusted my strategy. I found that watching live streaming helped me to engage with women efficiently. I observed that TikTokers like interacting with their followers when they do live streaming. They would randomly read some comments on the chat bar and then respond to them. Therefore, when I was watching someone's live streaming, I posted some comments and interacted with her. In this way, gradually, they were attracted by my TikTok ID and had an initial impression of me before I formally connected with them one-to-one. Three of my informants (Xu, Yuan, Ba) even would say hello to me when she received a notification from TikTok, "(my TikTok ID) entered the live streaming room". They would say, "Hey, (my TikTok ID), here you are. Have you had your dinner yet?" That is a common way for Chinese people to greet others and start the conversation (J. Li, 2011).

Only after I received such cues that can be identified as trust built<sup>13</sup> from potential informants, I took further actions. I briefly introduced my research to them, including main content and the aim of the interview. I asked them if it were possible to add them as my *Weixin* (微信 WeChat) friends<sup>14</sup>. In WeChat, I further explained the aim, the structure, data security, and relevant risks during the interview to them in detail. After they reviewed all information and sent me their consent through WeChat message or oral confirmation, I then scheduled an interview with each woman through WeChat voice call or video call.

I finally had 15 respondents in total, and the interviews were scheduled for January and February 2021. I have attached a list of my respondents' characters; you can kindly find it in Annex 3. To gain knowledge about the transformation of their perception, I conducted unstructured interviews with a conversational style. This method is "useful in exploring intensively and extensively digging deeper into a situation, phenomenon, issue or problem" (Kumar, 2014) and it is widely used in feminist research (Corbin & Morse, 2003; Maynard & Purvis, 2013; Zimmerman & Roberts, 1982). It requires building a friendly, closed, and equal relationship with interviewees for further conversation (Ramos, 1989) and giving them considerable power to control the course of the interview (Corbin & Morse, 2003). Abiding by these principles, although I proposed some open-ended questions to them, they were the ones

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<sup>13</sup> The judgements were done according to my experience of networking.

<sup>14</sup> WeChat is the most popular instant communication Application in China. You can only use WeChat to send messages to each other after you add each other as WeChat friends.

who controlled the pace of the interview. Open-ended questions are developed grounded on the sub-research questions that I have posted in Chapter 1 (see Annex 1). Open-ended questions are only used to be the guide of the theme of the interview. According to what they narrated in the interview, not every question would be asked, especially in the case that they have already disclosed related information to me.

Before formally starting the interview, I disclosed the relevant content on the informed consent (see Annex 2). After gaining their verbal confirmation or consent sent via WeChat, I formally initiated our conversation. For those who were not comfortable with recording the conversation via digital devices, I recorded the key information on Word document during the conversations. During the interview, I just typed the keywords related to those six components of social reproduction. After the interview, I sort the key information into six components and completed relevant information around keywords. For those who say yes to the digital recording, I recorded our conversation through the laptop. After finishing the interview, I listened to the record, picked up key information, and added it to the fieldnote. I wrote a fieldnote for each woman, which contained their basic information and the information they convey via the interview. The basic information consists of the date, identification number (which used to identify them), age, location, profession before and after migration.

In terms of research risk, I was concerned about one main risk. The conversation might arouse their negative emotions when they narrate their feelings and attitudes towards social reproductive works, which delve into their intimate life experience. To handle this, I informed them of the potential risk before the interview. Related information was disclosed in the process of getting informed consent. I informed them they have the right to withdraw from my research. They can stop the interview at any time. I proposed open-ended questions like “how do you feel when you are doing these works” rather than ask their negative or positive feelings directly. And I created a safe atmosphere during the interview, for instance, I would comfort them when they told me they felt a bit nervous about the interview at the beginning. In short, following research ethics and being empathic made my interviewees feel safe and comfortable.

### **Data analysis and management**

I did coding to analyze my data. The first step was to identify the main themes. According to the research questions, six themes are activities, attitudes, emotions, behaviors, responsibilities, and relationships. I used six colors to highlight different themes in my fieldnote. After it, the second step was to identify repeated words and categorize them into keywords. I randomly selected five field notes and then identified some repeated phrases around a specific theme. Following this, I will code each keyword by abbreviating the theme and Arabic numerals in ascending order. For example, (Ac1), (Ac2), (Ac3) represent codes of activities. The third step was to read through all fieldnotes, label different codes to the responses, and then I found patterns of my data (Kumar, 2014).

All data stored on my laptop, USB, and OneDrive. I named a folder “Data\_Liang\_thesis\_2021” to store all files. The way to name the files followed one rule--the type of record plus the

informant's number, for instance, "fieldnote\_NO.1" & "transcript\_NO.2". All data are password protected. After completing the thesis, my supervisor will upload it to the archive drive for the chair group, Sociology of Development and Change.

### **Ethical issues**

I abided by *the Netherlands Code of Conduct for Research Integrity* rigorously. I stored data properly and kept data and information anonymous on the issue of confidentiality. I used their anonyms or when I wrote field notes and the thesis report. As a researcher, I used data and information presented them correctly and honestly in my thesis report. Besides, I practiced the interview morally defensible, for instance, letting them know the brief introduction about my research, obtaining their consent before formally start interviews.

### **Positionality statement**

Although the research is always required to be neutral and the bias should be eliminated, it is inevitable that my positionality have an impact on the research (Mason-Bish, 2019). In this section, I declared my positionality and how it influenced my research. I identified myself as a hybrid insider-outsider researcher in this research topic. I shared some common aspects with my research subjects, returned left-behind women, making me act as an insider. But meanwhile, we have different life experience.

#### ***As an insider***

My gender, migration experience, and my mother's oral history made me as an insider. In terms of gender, as same as my informants, I am a Chinese woman as well. I also face women's common dilemma in social reproduction. I have migration experience too. My informants migrated from rural areas to urban areas for work, similarly, I migrated from poor places to relatively developed places for better education. I was born in a fifth-tier city, Hezhou, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, and started to migrate from 12 years old. My extended family is quite traditional. Inside my extended family, elder generation still maintain the patriarchal clan and rules to organize and manage the relations and poverty inside the family. For instance, poverty would not pass by to female. Younger generation should serve the elderly well. Also, traditional gender labor division can be found inside my nuclear family. My dad used to a businessman and my mom was a stay-home mother. Grew up in this kind of family, originally, I thought it was natural that a woman is born in favor of taking care the family, especially the domestic chores, and man should be the main breadwinner of the family. After 12 years surrounding by this kind of traditional and patriarchal environment, migration for me is a self-transformation journey. Years living and studying in relatively developed places and received more education, I could gradually perceive well the contradictions between the namely old gender ideology and modern gender ideology. And also, during the interview with informants, I found I can easily get what they were talking about, such as some phrases. I would easily understand and identify what they were trying to convey because I am so familiar with traditional gender discourse.

Moreover, my mom was born in the rural area and was registered as rural resident, but she successfully settled down in the city via the employment contract from one state-owned company in Hezhou city. For the over past two more decades, she sometimes would share her migration stories with me. Her stories made me have an initial expression about migrant workers' life in the urban areas. Besides, when my little siblings and I were accepting education (siblings were at primary schools and I was doing my middle school education) in Guilin, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, she migrated with us for a few years for taking care of us. In the recent years, she occasionally mentioned to me that she always felt depressed when she was in Guilin. Because during the daytime, my siblings and I were all at schools, she stayed at home alone. This kind of migration experience and the oral history from my mom made me more easily understand women's words and empathize their feelings during the interviews.

Additionally, I am talented in various Chinese dialects, including Cantonese, Hakka, West-southern dialect. So that I was able to encourage my informants to speak the language that they preferred. Otherwise, they might skip over disclosing some information that they can't articulate clearly in Mandarin<sup>15</sup>. The information skipped might be valuable to me. For instance, Yue cannot speak Mandarin well. Before we formally started the interview, she told me that she spoke terrible Mandarin and she worried about if I could understand her words. I then asked her to speak Henan dialect to me and let me check if I could understand Henan dialect. Luckily, I can understand what she said. Therefore, during the interview, she spoke the Henan dialect to me and I spoke Mandarin.

### *As an outsider*

However, some aspects made me so different from my research subjects. I was born in the urban area and unlike my informants who are registered as rural population, I was registered as an urban resident in the population system. It means that I enjoyed different welfare system and I can access to better education resource than them. The different population registration between them and me make the trajectory of my life so different from theirs. Besides, I am receiving postgraduate education while their average education level is high school. I am a feminist that advocates the gender equality. To eliminate the potential bias due to my feminist identity, I had an awareness that I cannot propose any feminism ideas that would influence women's narrative. Otherwise, they might try to say something that I want. These aspects might made them feel distant from me. When I tried to initial rapport with potential informants, I did find that they perform a bit vigilantly. To deal with that, I answered their questions in an honest and polite manner. Also, in order to get closed to their community, I posted some videos in TikTok to show that I was active in TikTok as well.

Additionally, as a Chinese, Marxism is mandatory in middle school and university education curriculum. Benefiting from the Marxism education, I can easily make sense of the underlying logic of Marxist feminism. Also, due to the original interest in Marxism, I had a bias to select Marxist feminism as the theory for my research and to propose research questions grounded in

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<sup>15</sup> Mandarin, official dialect of Chinese in China.



the Marxist feminism theory.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter focus on data and methods. A clarification of reaching research subjects, data collection and analysis were offered. An illustration about how I stored and managed data has given. At last, statement of ethical issues and my positionality are followed.

## Chapter 4 Research Finding: Activities and Attitudes

“Who would like to do housework? It really drives me crazy!”

Zhong, February 05<sup>th</sup> 2021

“Anyway, it’s annoying. I want to go out, but I can’t leave.”

Yuan, January 24<sup>th</sup> 2021

### Introduction

Female migrant workers in cities usually lived in dormitories or rent rooms near factories (Ngai & Smith, 2007; Ren & Pun, 2006; Smith & Pun, 2006). In one of the great pieces of Pun (2005), she depicted the life of *dagongmei* (打工妹 women factory workers). They chatted while working and sitting by the assembly line, listened to the radio after work, and discussed their future lives in the dormitories. Their lives have been well documented by scholars, but I will focus on how they reproduce themselves in the city, and what happened to their reproductive activities when they returned to villages?

Scholars have argued that after return, women needed to do mainly agriculture production and providing care inside the family (H. Wu & Ye, 2016). In addition to these works, scholars found that returned women have a strong sense of economic independence, making them do some relatively high-income production work in villages (Han, 2020). However, Han did not point out what factors make the balance of reproduction and production happen successfully.

Through the in-depth study of activities, my research will add to current empirical studies of rural women. I studied what once happened to the social reproduction activities when they changed their identity from wage labor to returned women. And I looked into how women deal with productive works and reproductive works after the return. Could they balance these two, or just focus on the reproductive work? If they are well balanced, are there any prerequisites that enable them to achieve both? Besides, in terms of attitudes, as their social reproduction and production activities change, what changes have taken place in their attitudes to social reproduction activities? Are attitudes to different social reproduction activities the same?

In this chapter, I will answer these questions. The purpose of this chapter is to explore the changes in women’s attitudes and activities alongside migration. To begin with the changes in terms of reproductive works, I will make readers have a general sense of concrete social reproductive work they did or do. Next, I turn to focus on attitudes to see how they changed over time. At last, I come up with a few arguments grounded on the research results.

## Activities has been boosted

### *More tasks, less play*

Time that some women invested in social reproductive activities has been prolonged. In the urban, they worked 8 hours per day or a bit longer. After that, they can arrange the time to reproduce themselves. However, during interviews, I invited them to describe the schedule of a typical day to me so that intuitively I can know how much time they spend in social reproduction every day. The estimated hours that they spent in social reproduction is shown in Figure 4. We can see that 6 women only engage with social reproduction, they spent about 15 hours per day in doing different kind of social reproduction works. In addition, it is interesting to find that some women successfully engage with both social reproduction and production.

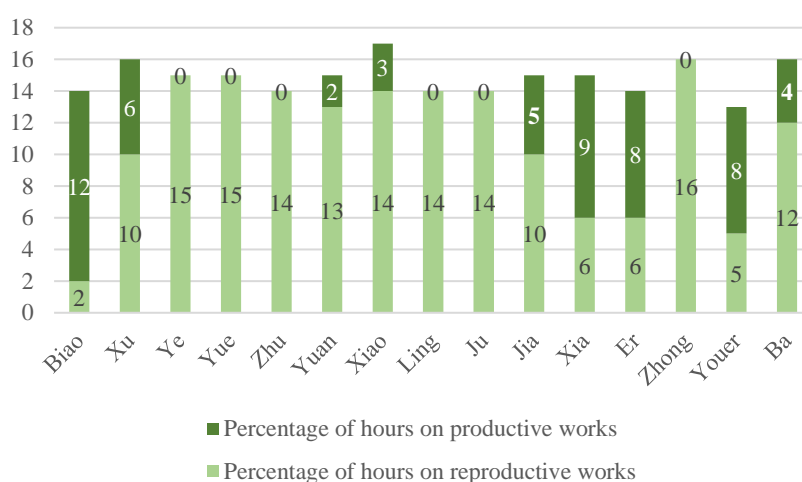


Figure 4 Time on reproductive works and productive works

Social reproductive activities had been more complicated after the return. Previously, they were alone in urban areas, what they needed to do was to take care of themselves and clean the small space they lived in, which was quite different from the current situation. In the past, women who lived in a dormitory cleaned the room with their roommates together (Ye, Yue). In addition, some factories have canteens, which means workers could have meals there, so they did not cook by themselves. Factories had taken over some social reproductive activities, and roommates also shared some. Even if they rented a room close to workplaces, housework was not too much for them (Zhong, Yuan, Zhu). Whereas, currently, they clean their houses<sup>16</sup>, which are much larger than rooms they lived in.

I also gained insight from the example given by Zhong to see how social reproductive activities have become more complicated. Zhong used to work in a supermarket in Shenzhen, Guangdong province, and the working hour was 8 hours a day. In that period, she cooked

<sup>16</sup> In China's rural areas, every household has a piece of *zhajidi* (宅基地 rural residential land), they can build a house on it. More information can be found in Wikipedia: <https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E5%AE%85%E5%9F%BA%E5%9C%B0> (in Chinese)

porridge every morning and some easy dishes for lunch and dinner, such as noodles with pickles and meat. She stated:

I lived alone anyway; I could just cook whatever easy to make. But now, I have to concern about the reasonable ratio of meats to vegetables and if dishes are nutritious. I cannot repeat meals for a couple days. I also need to concern about if meals accommodate the flavor preference of both my kids and parents-in-law. In the past, in Shenzhen, I cooked for myself perfunctorily. Now, I cook for the whole family thoughtfully.

From Zhong's description, we can see that even though they were doing the same thing, they have had more concerns. Return means that the center of social reproduction has been no longer taking care of themselves, along with moving into husbands' houses, living with in-laws and having babies, and it has already marked the change of the center of social reproductive works. Just like what Zhong implied, they not only need to please themselves, but also need to please others and cater others' need.

Besides, their roles as caregivers for their children and parents-in-law have added more tasks to them. Women shared their daily routine with me, according to the data that I collected, I found that around their kids, on the daily basis, their tasks are, for instance, preparing breakfast, bathing them, sending them to schools and picking them up from schools, monitoring their homework, and many others.

The description of Ling is the most detailed. I met her occasionally one day. I cannot remember the exact date that I watched her first video, but still can remember the content in that video. Her pajamas impressed me a lot. In the video, she was wearing thick cotton pajamas and cutting branches with a firewood knife. The text at the bottom of the video read: "I never thought I would become a left behind woman. I still have to be happy in ordinary days. (Date: November 9<sup>th</sup> 2020)" Around November and December, when I was available, I would listen to her voice live streaming, posted questions to her during the livestreaming. At that time, the number of her audiences was pretty few, for her, I was one of her big fans. So, the process of building rapport was quite smoothly. And she agreed be a part of my research weeks later. The interview was scheduled at the end of January 2021. She told me that she has three kids and lives with her parents-in-law. Her eldest son is four years old, and her twin sons are almost two years old.

Every day, before the elder son getting up at 7:20, I brush teeth, wash face, and then wake my elder son up and help him get dressed. At around 8:00, I send him to kindergarten. After that, I make breakfast for other family members. Before lunchtime, I generally wash clothes and cleans the house. After dealing with tasks around lunch, I walk to the kindergarten to pick up my elder son. Afterward, I usually take three children to the park to play. At around dinner time, 17:00, we then go back home. Followed I cook dinner, feed my kids, bathe them, and then have a WeChat video call with my husband. After it, I coax children to sleep. After that, I do the voice broadcast, you know (...) Every day is to do some piecemeal things. I go

around children all day<sup>17</sup>.

These are all the tasks that Ling needs to finish every single day for her children. Similar to Ling, Zhong's life is also take her children as the center. She has two little babies. The elder one go to kindergarten every day, the younger one has not yet met the age requirement of enrollment. On the interview, she also said something similar:

For example, when we<sup>18</sup> say we do housework, it means we take care of children. Like others who are free, they go out and do some small things<sup>19</sup>. People like us who have no fields to yield are just at home. In fact, this kind of life is very annoying after a long time. I go around children every day.

From their point of view, their life has devoted to their children. They took their children as the center of their life, and arranged their schedules based on children's daily routine. However, for them, taking children as the center of their life mainly because children need them, or you can understand it as, children need caring from their mom. Xu, women who earn money at home by doing live streaming, disclosed: "I hope when my children grow up, till the time that I don't have to look at them all the time, I can go out to work." Xu's words could explain why women spent every minute in taking care the children. The reason is pretty straightforward, that is because children need their mom.

In addition to children, they have to take care of parents-in-law, such as daily healthcare. Some elderlies are in poor health and suffer from chronic illnesses, leading to limited mobility and the disability to fully take care of themselves. Consequently, daily chronic disease management is needed. Xu's mother-in-law suffers from cirrhosis because she likes drinking *baijiu*<sup>20</sup> (白酒) all year round. Her father-in-law once had a cerebral hemorrhage and ischemic stroke. She usually supervises them to take the correct dose of pills at the right intervals, reminds them to drink less, and persuades them to form a good lifestyle.

Although there are many works that they have to finish around children, parents-in-law, and housework, reproducing themselves is also essential. Unlike working in urban areas, they do not need to go back to production workplaces anymore, but they have to go back to the social reproductive-work workplaces. Hence, reproducing themselves is still necessary and important. Nevertheless, women had deprioritized it for the sake of their kids and parents-in-law. Xia told me that she has not watched TV series for a long time because she did not have time to watch that. Now, for her, the most relax thing is to swipe TikTok after finishing all other works for the day.

Furthermore, there are some unique cases that I think deserve attention. Among 15 informants,

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<sup>17</sup> In the context, she meant she takes children as the center of her life.

<sup>18</sup> Here, in the context, we refer to "we left-behind women".

<sup>19</sup> She meant doing small business.

<sup>20</sup> Baijiu, 白酒 in Chinese, is a kind of liquor from China. It normally has a high alcohol content (35%-60%). See Wikipedia for more information: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baijiu>

2 women currently provide care to their nephews. Er provides caring to two sons of her husband's brother, and Ye takes care of the son of her little brother. Migrated relatives externalized the caring works to the woman who was being left behind in the village, making the migrated relatives have the capability to earn double wages in the urban. Both of them expressed their hesitation when their brothers asked them for help, but they both finally say yes to them after careful consideration because it was their brothers that asked for help. Without kinship, they would say no without hesitation because it is hard for them to raise one more child, as what Ye said:

I have to help my brother with the children. He went out to work with his wife, in Dongguan<sup>21</sup>, and then left the child to me. Well, after all, it's my brother's child. The kid is close to me<sup>22</sup>, so I promised to help take care of him. My brother gives me some money every month to buy milk powder and diapers, 1000 *yuan*<sup>23</sup> a month. If it were someone else, I wouldn't help no matter how much money I was given.

After returning home, women have become the core social-reproduction labor force of the family. The objects of their reproductive activities might include children, parents-in-law, but also the children of others. Due to this, just as what the title of this section said, "more tasks, little play", they have more social reproduction things to finish and their time for self-reproduce has been squeezed.

### ***Some women successfully balance reproduction and production***

According to Figure 4, you can see that some informants had full-time or part-time jobs in rural areas, which means that they are engaging with both reproductive and productive works in villages. Some women run small business in the local; some women got an employment contract; some women do TikTok e-commerce.

Biao has two kids who have enrolled in a primary school. She manages her vineyard every day, leaving home early and returning late. She told me she did not do much housework at home. She walked home from the vineyard after sunset. It was already dinner time when she got home. "My mother-in-law helped me send children to school and then pick them up from school. I don't have to cook at night because I sometimes come back late. My mother-in-law would cook." At night, she cleans the house occasionally and helps children with homework. In addition to Biao, Xia also runs a small business in the town. Xia runs a rice noodle stall in the local market. She cooks and vendors rice noodles and traditional snacks, like Tofu cake, from 7 a.m. to 3 p.m.. After close the vendor stand, she usually edits TikTok videos at home, meanwhile takes care of her children. At night, she prepares snacks for the next day beforehand. Her parents-in-law would help her vendor foods if she needs to deal with urgent issues around

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<sup>21</sup> One of cities in Guangdong province.

<sup>22</sup> In the context, she meant that she is related by blood to her nephew.

<sup>23</sup> Around 130 Euro.

her kids.

Formal employment via contract is also possible. Er is a kindergarten teacher. Her two children<sup>24</sup> were enrolled in the kindergarten where she works, but kids were not assigned to Er's class. During the daytime, Er goes to the kindergarten with her children. After school, kids wait for their mom to finish the work and then go back home together. After entering the house, she then becomes the superwoman in social reproductive activities with assistance from her parents-in-law. Yuan got a part-time contract from an insurance company. She works from 10:00 to 12:00. In that timeslot, her kids are all at school, so she is available to take a part-time job. "Anyway, I'm idle when my children at schools. It's good to go to work."

The reasons why these women have time and energy to engage in productive activities can be explained by the following reasons. First, children are at school during the daytime. Schools, as an essential social reproductive institution according to SRT, take over a part of social reproduction responsibilities. Children study there on daytime and meanwhile schools have the responsibility to take care of them when they are at school. The second reason is that women's parents-in-law could help take care of the children or the business. In this case, they have energy to participate in production activities.

Using TikTok to access my potential informants unexpectedly brought me an interesting finding--live streaming e-commerce breaks the spatial boundary between social reproduction and production. Among my interviewees, several women made money from TikTok live streaming. Xu, who has more than 100,000 followers on TikTok, always doing live streams while taking care of her children, afternoon from 2 p.m. to 6 p.m., evening from 8 p.m. to around 10 p.m.. Every time, in her live streaming room, you would see that Xu sat in front of her phone; her children stayed next to her. She took care of her children while interacting with audiences in her live streaming room. Xu earns considerably via TikTok live stream. She can get a certain percentage from the TikTok virtual gifts from her streaming audiences and the performance reward for selling goods during live streams.

By doing TikTok live streams, women can engage in productive activities while doing reproductive works. This kind of mode no longer separates production and reproduction space as factories do. Women regard doing live streams in TikTok as a flexible way to make money. Ba said:

TikTok, TikTok is good. I can take care of the baby myself and then do the live streaming simultaneously. It's tired, but I don't need to travel within the city by crowded subway to meet customers every day. It's indeed much better. It's better than when I was in Guangdong. At least, the time is flexible. In the past, I worked overtime for a long time. Now, I can arrange the time by myself. When I am not that busy, I can do it like four or five hours per day. If I'm busy that day, I can just broadcast two or three hours.

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<sup>24</sup> Er has three kids, two in kindergarten, one in primary school.

It's very good, you know.

From their point of view, earning money via TikTok is quite flexible and this is one of the advantages of TikTok. The other advantage is about how much they can earn via TikTok. In the community of left-behind women, the success stories of TikTokers that gain considerable income by promoting goods during livestreaming, like Xu, have stimulated many other women to give a try. Ling, for example, has been doing live streaming in TikTok for half a month until the time I first met her in TikTok. She told me that she joined the rural women's live streaming community in WeChat, and staff from TikTok required them to live ten hours a week<sup>25</sup>. TikTok would push their broadcast to more users' onboarding if they achieve this homework. To finish it, she hid in the living room to do a live stream after her sons fell asleep. She hoped that she could also attract some users to follow her account through doing live streaming. And after accumulating a certain number of followers, she could engage in e-commerce as well. However, one day, I received a WeChat message from her. She told me that she had quit because only a few people would watch her broadcast even though she finished the homework from TikTok, and additionally she was always worried about her sons as she did not stay beside them.

Stories of Xu, Ba, Ling showed the double sides of TikTok e-commerce. On the one hand, TikTok e-commerce indeed has benefited many rural women and it brings hope to those women who want to earn some money. On the other hand, through the regulation of the algorithm, TikTok e-commerce put pressure on women and this mode overlapping the productive space and reproductive space might, or already, squeeze women's energy and time relentlessly.

### ***Bridge home and their husbands***

Except for finishing social reproductive works happen in the villages, they engage with their husbands who now in the destination of the labor migration via some social reproductive works. It reflected in relationship engagement, both women and their husbands and children and their fathers, and managing remittance to cover daily expenditure in villages.

Among my interviewees, they, without exception, would have daily WeChat video call(s) to their husbands. They miss their husbands and need emotional support from their husbands. Yuan told me that the spatial separation made her feel extremely depressed. She wanted to talk with her husband every night. Our conversation happened at night. During the interview, I asked her, "tonight, has your husband called you?" She laughed and answered, "I specifically told him not to call me tonight because I wanted to have a video call with you." Although she needs emotional support from her husband, she also shows empathy for him according to her words:

You see, I posted a lot of sad videos on TikTok, and I think it's a way to let

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<sup>25</sup> According to the description from Ling, TikTok staff would send WeChat group invitation to those women do live streaming in TikTok. Through adding that WeChat group, women can get supervision from TikTok staff. For instance, how to boost followers, what requirements there are in order to get TikTok's traffic support. Traffic support is an algorithm-based incentive from TikTok, it can be understood as pushing livestreaming to more users.



off steam. Anyway, if I scolded him, he would ask me to try to understand his condition. He had to pay the mortgage and earn money, so he would ask me to show understanding and sympathy for him more.

In addition, they would also let children communicate with husbands via video calls, for enhancing the father-children relationship, “otherwise they would feel distant from their daddy,” Er said. And she added detail to argue the importance of having video call regularly by comparing the parent-child relationship between herself and her son and that between her husband and her son:

I asked him (son) the other day, ‘do you want your dad back?’ He said no. I asked him again, ‘do you want daddy to buy you a cake?’ And then he said yes right away. I asked him this morning that do you want me to call your dad back. The answer is ‘no’ again...like when my son was just over a year old, my husband once came back at that time. My husband pretended to hit me, pretended to hit me, then my one-year-old son tried to stop his father, holding my husband’s hand, he did not allow my husband to hit me.

The second type of engagement is remittance support. Many women rely on husbands’ remittance, especially those who do mostly the reproductive works at home. Normally, they would receive the remittance from their husbands and then decide how to arrange them. “After he received the wage, he would keep a part of it for daily expenditure in the urban and then transfer the rest to me,” Yuan said. Women would use the money to support the operation of the household. Like what Yue said, “my husband’s salary is 4,500 *yuan*<sup>26</sup> a month, and he gives me some money every month. I use it to buy food, to pay for my kids’ expenditure, to cover my family’s expenses.”

Above these two points, social reproductive activities, like relationship engagements and use husbands’ salary to support the daily expenditure of the household, has bridged the connection between family members left-behind in the villages and husbands in urban. Emotional satisfaction comfort women and children, making it an essential component of daily reproduction. And the remittance support women to unfold social reproductive activities successfully at home.

After reviewing their activities, we know that their activities in terms of social reproduction have changed a lot. As the change of activities, then how have women’s attitudes towards social reproduction changed? In the next section, I would reveal women’s change in terms of attitudes.

### **“It used to be much easier!”**

Before migrating to urban areas, some women showed that their biological parents did not require them to do housework at home (Yuan, Ba, Er). Others (Zhong and Ling) told me that they used to help their mothers with farming when they were young, but they were fine with

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<sup>26</sup> Around 600 Euro.

those works though. Just like Zhong, when she was young, her mom would ask her to pick peanuts or carry water from the well after school. Even so, she felt that she could easily handle those things. But now, most women feel very overwhelmed because there are too many things to do, no matter social reproductive works or productive works.

Yue, Zhong, and Ye all once mentioned these two words when they were describing their current life to me. “Boring!” “Repeated.” They thought it was boring to repeat the same routine day by day. Yue told me that her main duty at home was providing care to her little daughter and mother-in-law. When she had nothing to do, she would invite other women nearby to play MahJong<sup>27</sup>. Ye said that her days were almost the same, so it was boring. Zhong joked with me about the tedious and tiresome feeling that stems from picking toys. “I used to put them (toys) in a basket and take them out for my kids to play with. But then I just found that every time few minutes after I cleaned up toys on the floor, toys were lying all over there again.” Via her description, I could image that in order to clean those toys, she had to bend down, pick toys up, bend down, pick toys up, again and again.

“How about just pick them up once a day?” I asked. “I was afraid that my parents-in-law would be tripped,” she answered. She then came up with an idea. That was packing her kids’ toys in a plastic bag and hiding them in a place that is inaccessible for children. Currently, when her sons want to play with toys, she pours the toys out of the plastic bag. Later, she then picks up toys from the floor, puts them in plastic bags, and hides them as soon as possible. “I have already been sick of toys.”

Repeated works and repeated routine indeed have already made them feel exhausted. Although they thought their daily life was quite tedious, their attitudes were still quite positive in terms of taking care of children. “They are my children. I gave birth to them and I should raise them up. Only by doing so, they would be close to me.” Ye said. Her words revealed a positive attitude toward raising children. Many women told me that although raising a child is hard and boring sometimes, they can get great emotional satisfaction from it (Er, Yuan, Xia, Ba, Ye). They wish to have a good parent-child relationship with their children and accompany them. “I have to raise my children myself,” Er said firmly. This idea had been reinforced after she heard about her colleague’s story:

If you leave... (pause) the old saying ‘one’s life can be predicted by one’s character and morality at the age of three (三岁看一生)’ is true. Children are really difficult to be educated without their parents. When he needs you, you’re not at home. When they don’t need you, you come back. Till then, they don’t need you anymore. Like my colleague, she is 36 years old. In the past, not long after his child was born, she handed over the child to her mother-in-law. She finally returned home two years ago. When she came back, she found that the child didn’t listen to her words. Now she has another child. This time, she said, ‘I won’t leave. I’ll take care of the child

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<sup>27</sup> MahJong is a kind of Chinese board game.

myself’. She said, ‘I’ll teach myself. Otherwise, the child will not be obedient at all.’ She pretty regretted to migrated to urban for earning money.

Learning the lesson from the story, Er wanted to accompany her children and to establishes a good and intimate relationship with them. Women gained a great sense of satisfaction and accomplishment when they witnessed highlight moments of their children or perceived happy moments while interacting with their children. For instance, Ye is proud of her two sons as they performed great at school. At the end of January 2021, before students’ holiday, two sons of Ye both got awarded with “the first-class student”. I saw her post with a photo of children’s certificates in her WeChat moment and it was written, “Good job! [emoji-thumb up] [emoji-thumb up]”.

However, when it comes to taking care of parents-in-law, women’s attitudes are quite different. Some women provide caring to parents-in-law with an attitude of gratitude (Er, Biao, Ling, Xia, Youer). They got along well with each other, and their parents-in-law would offer women help when women need it. However, around this, Yue showed a different attitude. In Yue’s opinion, mother-in-law took for granted Yue took care of her. “My mother-in-law has a deep-rooted rural mindset<sup>28</sup> (*nongcunsixiang* 农村思想). She thinks I should serve her as I got married with her son... she looks down upon me...because I have no income.” She now lives on the money that her husband sends back every month. “Inferiority... due to no income.” Yue tries to relieve this kind of feeling by doing all housework and obeying her mother-in-law as much as possible. And she regarded the remittance as her “wage” of taking care of the family. For Yue, caregiving is not the result of gratitude, instead, it is the result of the ideological regulation of accommodating mother-in-law and the necessity of healing uncomfortable feelings.

In addition, Xu showed a somewhat resigned attitude towards providing care to elderlies. Her parents-in-law have chronic diseases. She often feels resigned while providing health care. She has suggested her mother-in-law drink less for a long time, but her mother-in-law resisted following her suggestion. “Angry me! She thought my words were annoying. And she thought I dislike her. In fact, I just concerned about her health.” From the perspective of Xu, she and her family are all in the same boat. She indicated that chronic diseases have threatened the financial condition of the household. Therefore, she wanted to alleviate these negative impacts of diseases by convincing parents-in-law to break their bad habits and replace them with good ones.

“It used to be much easier!” I would like to quote this sentence from Zhong’s narration to summarize the changes in attitudes before and after returning to the village.

## **Conclusion**

After exploring changes in activities and attitudes in the field of reproduction, through SRT, I came to the following arguments:

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<sup>28</sup> Rural ideology refers to the young people should obey and service the elder people.

1) When in urban areas, as wage labor, as far as social reproduction is concerned, what women have to do was simply reproducing themselves. However, after returning to the village, women are no longer *dagongmei* in urban areas who earn wages by selling labor power. They have become pillars of their families. They act like servants, housekeepers, caregivers, cleaners, teachers, and many others.

2) Under certain preconditions, rural women can withdraw from the field of reproduction to varying degrees (but cannot withdraw completely) and return to the field of production. One premise is that their children are at school age, the education system takes over part of the responsibility of social reproduction. Or the people in the family share part of the activities so that women can engage in production.

3) The integration of production space and reproduction space is realized in TikTok live broadcast e-commerce. In the traditional production model of the factory, production activities take place in workshops, and reproduction activities take place in such as canteens, dormitories, or rented rooms. The way of making money has broken the original spatial separation of production space and reproduction space, allowing women to engage in social reproduction activities while at the same time engaging in production activities. We recognize that TikTok e-commerce has given rural women hope. However, we have to point out that it is difficult to achieve because it requires women to produce videos that meet users' favor, live streaming should be attractive, and it also relies on TikTok's algorithm.

4) The family as the smallest economic unit has been torn into two sections. One section has been allocated in the rural, while the other section has been allocated the urban part. However, this spatial tearing is bridged through the interaction of production and reproduction. Women in villages for taking care of their next generation and elderlies. Husbands continued to make money in the city. The social reproduction activities that mainly take houses in villages as the main spot and the production activities that take workplaces in the city as the main spot together support the operation of the household which can be regarded as an economic main body.

5) Doing reproductive works was no longer easy. Women's attitudes in terms of social reproduction have been ambivalent. I discovered mixing feelings over there and their attitudes towards distinct social reproductive works are quite different. They not only frankly admitted their fatigue in the process of raising children but also recognized the sense of satisfaction brought about by raising children. Their attitude towards caring for the elderly depends on their relationship with the elderly. During the research, multiple attitudes were revealed, including helplessness, gratitude, compensation.

## Chapter 5 Research Finding: Emotions and Behaviors

“I was young and didn’t think that much.”

Er, February 04<sup>th</sup> 2021

### Introduction

Before we formally turn to emotions and behaviors, I want to clarify the difference between attitudes and emotions and then articulate the relations between emotions and behaviors. I want to borrow statements from Scherer (2005) to help us distinguish these two, to unfold my further elaboration. Attitude is a long-term feeling emotion is a short-term feeling, and it changes rapidly. Emotion is elicited or anchored in particular events. Driven by the evaluation towards certain events, people would have a quick response to them, either physical (such as smiling, tearing) or physiological (such as being elated, jealous) (Scherer, 2005).

The purpose of this chapter will further uncover women’s intimate feelings, to vividly record their experience. I presented women’s various emotions and their affected behaviors by looking into their stories. The first section is around their emotions and behaviors before the return. The followed sections are around emotions and behaviors that happened currently. For better understanding, I categorized their emotions and behaviors into three sectors according to the specific people in events. They are parents-in-law, children, and husbands.

### They used to be naive

During the interview, I invited them to say something about their emotions in terms of doing social reproductive works when they are in the urban, or when they were at the very young age. However, they told me that, they were too young to have some specific feelings towards doing those social reproductive works. “I was young and didn’t think that much,” Er said. For them, no matter getting marry or having babies, these works happened quite naturally. It is hard for them to say some special. Er added, “I remembered that I just got pregnancy, and then...after having baby, I naturally chose to get married with my husband, and then I just moved back.” Same as Xiao, Zhong, and Ju, it was hard for them to recall specific emotions that happened when they were in urban.

Interestingly, Yuan told me a lot about her love story in the city. She called her ex-boyfriend “*zhanan* (asshole 渣男)”, and she narrate a pretty long story about how she met her ex-boyfriend, how she discovered her ex-boyfriend had an affair, and how she said goodbye to that bad guy. Although the love story between her and her ex-boyfriend is slightly tragic, I can imagine the life of an innocent girl working in Shanghai. She once dared to love and dared to hate.

## **Deal with parents-in-law**

As the bearer of social reproduction, women have some contradictory ideas towards social reproductive works with parents-in-law. What kinds of contradiction were over there? How did contradictions evoke women's emotions? How did women deal with those emotions? In this section, I will reveal answers by presenting a few cases.

### ***Conflicts towards raising children***

Women have different ideas about raising children from their in-laws. Yuan regard female and male were equal while her mother-in-law carries a male preference, making her kids and herself once experience the unfair treatment. She was once irritated by various events around this. And Er was wary of in-law spoiling her children. She thought her parenting technique was more correct and on science.

#### **Yuan**

Yuan admitted her dissatisfaction towards her mother-in-law as she firmly believed that mother-in-law holds the son preference value. Mother-in-law's value was repugnant to her because her daughter and she were once treated unfairly by mother-in-law. After giving birth to her daughter, years ago, her mother-in-law only visited her and her little girl in the hospital once. "When I was in the hospital, she came and took a hurried look, and then left." However, the second time, she gave birth to a baby boy, her mother-in-law showed a totally different attitude. "My second child is a son. She came to the hospital to serve me that time." She sensitively felt the diverse attitude from her mother-in-law, and the following events further demonstrated her judgment. "She did not provide any care to my daughter when my daughter was a baby, while she provided care my son from 4 months old to one year old." She perceived the unfairness from her mother-in-law, leading to resentment.

In the story of Yuan, she expressed to me her dissatisfaction with her mother-in-law's patriarchal gender ideology (son/male preference). In fact, we can also see the strong conflict between the idea of equality between men and women carried by Yuan and the idea of the traditional patriarchal system carried by her mother-in-law. The manifestation of this conflict lies in the different behaviors of the mother-in-law after learning the news that Yuan gave birth to a daughter and news that Yuan gave birth to a son, as well as in providing unequal care to the daughter and son of Yuan. Although Yuan does not like the patriarchal thinking of mother-in-law, she still allowed her mother-in-law to take care of her baby boy.

#### **Er**

Unlike Yuan, the conflict between Er and her parents-in-law reflected in parenting techniques, that is the educational skills of the next generation. Er has a good relationship with her parents-in-law, but she was wary of her parents-in-law sometimes because they were inclined to spoil her children. "Once, my son scolded his grandpa. I then told my son that you can't scold grandpa. Even in this situation, his grandpa was reluctant to discipline him. I said 'why don't

you discipline him?', and he overlooked my question and still giggled at my son. No matter what my son says about his grandfather, his grandfather always shows his smiling face to him." Such a response from the father-in-law may encourage her sons to continue to disrespect the elders. She showed her discontent to me and said she tried to set a boundary between her children and father-in-law by letting her children stay next to her as much as possible.

Likewise, Xia also conveyed the differences between herself and the older generation on the concept of parenting in the interview. "If I leave the child to my mother-in-law, I'm worried that my mother-in-law will spoil my son."

### *Harmony inside the family*

Although there are different kinds of contradiction between women and in-laws, some women mentioned some peace and love moments when they got along with in-laws.

Er said her mother-in-law treated her like the biological daughter. Days before the interview date, Er bought a pair of new shoes to her mother-in-law, her mother-in-law showed her appreciation for Er and complimented Er for buying the shoes in front of their neighbourhood. Er said:

Like days ago, I bought her a pair of shoes. In front of the neighbors, she would praise me, like 'she often buys clothes for me. She bought almost all my clothes for me'... Life is like this. You are good to me and I am good to you. That's it.

Xia was also thankful for her parents-in-law because she once obtained giant support from her parents-in-law to run the small business in the local market. Every time when Xia's parents-in-law offer her help, Xia was moved a lot. She told me:

Originally, I set up the rice noodle stand just for money. I just thought about making some money. But I didn't expect that my parents-in-law would help me look after the stand. Actually, I know they loved us ("us" refers to Xia and her children) so that they are willing to help me at such an old age. My mother-in-law's joints ache sometimes. I asked her to go to physiotherapy, she didn't want to, and I knew she was trying to save money.

We could see that there is the unity and harmony inside some family which is grounded the mutual respect. And at some moments, women's appreciation towards parents-in-law will be evoked by parents-in-law's words and behaviors. In the next section, we will term to women's emotions and behaviours when they were taking care the children.

### **Intensive emotional experience in parenting**

#### *Anger and annoyance*

Women were irritated by their children when children got low marks from exams (Yuan), when

children ate with hands (Er), when children did not take women's words seriously and were disobedient (Zhu, Ye and Er). Following steps would be taken by angry women, I sort those out from their narrations.

In the first place, they would shout at kids and scold them for preventing them from doing bad things again. They thought such verbally disciplining is one of the effective ways to scare children off. After children stopped crying or calming down, they would first tell children what they did wrong and then required them to promise not to do that again. Er stated:

Sometimes I get annoyed when I take care of children... I beat my children as soon as they make trouble... Educating children is like this. Other parents might tolerate their children's tiny bad behaviors. For me, no. For example, if I see my kids eat with hands rather than spoons or chopsticks. For me, no. Firstly, I would tell him/her do not to do that. If he/she ignores this, alright, I can say it again. If he/she ignores the second one. Fine, the third time is still fine. But, if he/she continuous to ignore my words. I will beat he/she. To tell you the truth, I just hit it gently. They would know they did something wrong after being hit.

When they found that verbally disciplining does not work, they would turn to the second step, beating the child. "I just hit my kid, well, on the ass with a clothes rack. He wears thick clothes in winter and would not be hurt," Er said. Such intimidation would show their anger to children, to make children hear and obey them. "Otherwise, they will not be afraid of you." Er added.

For them, the above methods help to establish a majestic and dominant image of parents and make children realize the consequences of being naughty. In Yuan's view, yelling and beating can correct children's behavior and will not negatively affect children neither physically and mentally. She also mentioned that her parents treated her the same way when they were young, so she thought it was fine to yell and beat children.

However, after beating their children, they would be deeply self-blamed. Er said, "after being beaten, sometimes minutes later my son gave me his puppy eyes and got close to me to show that his sorry, I would regret all things that I did with impulse and anger."

### ***Surrounded by happiness***

Although anger happens sometimes, women often feel happy within parenthood. For example, when children got the reward or obtained significant progress, they would have a strong sense of accomplishment. Ye has an introverted personality. She was calm when we were talking about other issues, but she was enraptured when she talked about her two sons. She talked a lot about her sons' outstanding performance at school and looked ahead to her children's bright future.

Some other women enjoy the time with their children. Er said she enjoyed weekend time. Every weekend, she would like to cook some delicious food to her kids:



My sons like to eat *baozi* (包子, steamed buns) very much. Then I would make some foods like *baozi* and dumplings in weekends. Anyway, I am delighted when I see my children happy.

Also, Ju like bring her children to the local market every weekend:

Every weekend, I like go to the market. I would buy some snacks to my kids. They like snacks, like cookies, lollipop. Also, I like bringing them to play slide. It is just nearby the lake.

After talking with my interviewees, I would like to use the word, bittersweet (痛并快乐着), to describe this sort of a blend of feelings. Negative emotions came up sometimes, but their children amused them sometimes, making them feel they were surrounded by happiness.

### **Influenced by husbands**

Although women are far away from their husbands, husbands can often affect their emotions. Their husbands would be the bridge between women and parents-in-law, their husbands would be the emotional supporters to women, and their husbands could even be the judger of women behaviors.

Before Yuan moved out from husband original house, Yuan lived with her mother-in-law. Every time, when Yuan failed to please mother-in-law, mother-in-law would make a complain to Yuan's husband behind Yuan's back. Her husband would have a talk with Yuan to ask her to follow mother-in-law's will, like her way to clean the house. She did understand why her husband spoke up for mother-in-law, but again and again, Yuan cannot tolerate this kind of conflict anymore. Meanwhile, her husband gradually thought from Yuan's perspective. Yuan explained:

It was probably because he used to witness something. When I gave birth to my son, in the hospital, the woman next to my bed survived from massive bleeding during delivery and then he has begun to realize that being a woman is not that easy.

A few years later, Yuan and her husband bought a second-hand apartment nearby the village. Yuan and her children moved into the apartment. For Yuan, moving out was her strategies to get rid of mother-in-law's monitor, which used to be the trigger of Yuan's negative emotion. Yuan stated:

I don't like my mother-in-law and don't want to quarrel with her. This is what people say, 'the contradiction between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law (婆媳矛盾)'. She and I don't like each other. At that time, I said something that she did not like. She would directly complain to my husband. Now, my children have grown up a bit, I don't want to quarrel with her in front of my children. So, I bought an apartment with my husband and moved out to live by myself. Out of sight, out of mind.

Based on Yuan's elaboration, Yuan's husband once tried to be the mediator of Yuan and mother. He tried to moderate the battle between Yuan and mother. In front of him, he needed to figure out how to deal with the conflict that whether wife should follow mother's way in doing social reproductive works.

Besides, Yuan's husband is the emotional support to Yuan. Yuan once suffered from depression because she missed her husband a lot. "I was not emotionally secure. I sent a WeChat message to him, but he did not reply for long time. I then asked him why he did not reply my message. You know, no one would not be too busy to swipe the phone and reply a message...I always questioned if he still loves me." The long distant relationship has led to the mental pain to Yuan. Yuan said, she wanted her husband back, she was always happy when her husband was at home as he could company Yuan and take over a part of social reproductive works.

Unlike Yuan, Yue has her own trouble. Her husband carries a strong patriarchal ideology. Yue's husband would not share some housework. Instead, he is picky to how Yue finish housework. When Yue's husband was at home, she would be annoyed sometimes when his husband pointed out her tiny mistakes. But she has already known how to let those words go. She would let husband's words go in one ear and out the other.

## **Conclusion**

In this section, we took a look at women's emotions and their behaviours affected by different emotions. I admit that I failed to collect that much data about their emotions and behaviors in terms of social reproduction that happened in the urban areas. The only information about emotions and behaviors of social reproduction was stem from the love story with ex-boyfriend of Yuan. Instead, the emotions and behaviors that narrated by my informants are almost about the production, like their feeling when they were in the workplace and the accomplishment that they achieved in career.

I was attributed this to two reasons. The first one is that it was hard for them to recall the events, the short-term feelings that happened years ago. And the second reason is that in the urban, they put more effort into production but not reproduction. Hence, emotions and behaviors around productive works would impress them more.

In sum, for the second research question, my answer would be, after returning to the village, women have tensive emotional experience around social reproductive works. Standing in the stage of social reproduction, women might be happy, angry, endure silently, feel annoying, and appreciate. They took different action in order to cope with these feeling, no matter positive of negative. From this, we see the struggle, compromise, but also the smiling faces.

## Chapter 6 Research Finding: Responsibilities and Relationships

“If I did all the work, I wouldn’t be tired to death?”

Ling, January 28<sup>th</sup> 2021

“Whoever can do it, just do it”

Biao, January 10<sup>th</sup> 2021

### Introduction

In this chapter, we move to responsibilities and relationships. Firstly, we will explore how women perceive labor division inside the household and relationships over there. In women’s opinions, who has the responsibility to do reproductive works? What changes are there before and after the migration? During it, the relationship between women and family members will be gradually clear. For instance, based on their perception of the responsibilities, correspondently, did labor division, in reality, meet women’s expectations in labor division, and how? And more widely, beyond the relationships inside the family, next, we will discuss how public social reproduction systems, including medical care insurance, pension, and schools, play a role in social reproduction.

### Whose responsibilities?

Before moving to the urban, they lived with their biological family members. Some women did not have the responsibility to do reproductive works for families (Yuan, Ba). “I don’t have to do housework before I get married. I am the youngest in my family. You know, usually, parents would favor the youngest child, so I don’t need to do any housework at home.” Yuan said.

However, some other women needed to help their parents to do something. For instance, Ling helped with herding cattle after dropping off from junior high school. Zhong’s mom used to be a left-behind woman. Mom usually needed help from Zhong and her siblings. Zhong assisted her mom to farm after school in partnership with her little brother. And her sister was responsible for cooking as she was good at cooking. Yue did some housework at home as well, “my mom would ask me to do housework, but not my brother.” She mentioned that her brother was not required to do it. After moving to the urban and over the past years, she has been realizing that she used to be the victim of her parents’ son preference value. Hence, Yue thought son preference was the main reason that why it was she that did the housework at home. At that time, in their mind, doing housework is the assignment distributed by parents and they just passively accept the homework from parents.

Moving back to the village, they then became the pillar of social reproduction. Women tended to share the work with other family members. They did not argue for split social reproductive

works equally, instead, they were inclined to the model, as Biao said, “whoever can do it, just do it”.

Biao manages a vineyard. She has a high expectation to her sons in terms of study. Biao said she would keep working hard in the grape business to financially support her children to enter a good high school and university. “If I don’t work hard, I won’t be able to pay two children’s tuition.” Her parents-in-law are responsible for doing housework, like cooking, in daytime. Her husband works in Shenzhen and charges in supervising children in study. He joins the section, education inside the family, via Internet. Specially, although her husband fit the characteristic of “migrant worker”, but her husband is in high-skilled industry, which is quite different from others. He obtained a bachelor’s degree and now works in a multinational company in Shenzhen as an IT engineer. He has a video call with children to teach them English every single night. When I was doing interview with Biao, I heard that her elder son was reading some English texts. I asked Biao, “is your son practicing English with his dad?” Biao answered and giggled, “yes! I don’t know English, and I cannot understand what he is saying.”

Biao’s argument in terms of sharing works also can be found in the labor division inside Zhu’s family. Zhu lives with her husband’s extended family, including parents-in-law, brother-in-law, and his wife and children. They worked as a team to maintain the operation of the family, and every family member has their specific duties. Zhu’s husband and brother-in-law are the main breadwinners of the household. Parents-in-law do farm for self-consumption. *Saosao* (嫂嫂 brother-in-law’s wife) mainly charges in housework. And Zhu is responsible for taking care of her newborn baby and her elder son. The co-work keeps the namely family machine running. Zhu stated:

Before the birth of my second kid, I did some housework at home. But currently I do not need to do the housework. My main duty is to take care of my little baby. My *saosao* takes main responsibility to housework, like cooking and cleaning. My brother-in-law raises several pigs in the backyard. My parents-in-law do farm.

In Chapter 4, section “it used to be easier”, and Chapter 5, section ‘intensive emotional experience in parenting’, I have already elaborated a bit about women’s sense of responsibility of being a good mother when I describe women’s attitude towards taking care of children. In short, they have a strong desire to accompany their children in villages motivated by educating children to good people in the future and want keep good relationships with their children. Moreover, Ba’s and Er’s stories added more content into this.

Er also said that in terms of taking care of the children, women are better at that and that was also the reason making her stay in the village for providing care. She compared her way of caring children and men’s way in order to argue that she was the best candidate to provide care to children instead of her husband.

Screw you! You<sup>29</sup> don't trust men to go back to the village to take care of children alone. You don't trust him. You let him come back and take care of the children, and then you go out to work... You cannot imagine how children's life likes. Men take care of children – the principle is...*Just Be Alive*<sup>30</sup> (活着就好). That day, the child in our kindergarten... It was cold that day. His dad wore him a thin coat and thin sweater. When that kid came to the kindergarten, I noticed that he was blue with cold...I then called his father. His father even did not realize that his son felt cold.

In her views, women are better at taking care the children. She did not believe that her husband can take care of their children well if she and her husband shift their position in labor migration. Ba's case also can show women's strong sense of responsibility of being mother. But, unlike other 14 interviewees, Ba's relationship with other family members and her way to executive her responsibility is quite different from others. Her situation is quite unique but I think her case is also valuable to see how women's change along with the migration.

As what I have mentioned before, Ba used to work in Guangdong province for nearly 10 years. She did not work in factories, instead, she engaged with relatively higher-skilled profession and she showed a strong sense of gender equality. Also, as she saved an amount of money which is quite considerable, it has empowered her greatly in the battle with the elder generation and tradition ideology in rural areas. She showed a strong struggle against the traditional gender ideology.

She did not get married with her partner. It means that she gave birth to her kid without marriage and this is not acceptable in China's traditional gender ideology. Having children out of marriage will even be regarded as a shameless act and it would add a shame for the family. Her statement on why she moved out and rent an apartment in the other village vividly showed her relationship with those who did not have migration history and her resistant to the traditional gender ideology. She said:

I moved out because my family gossiped about me. My big brother and his wife kicked me out because I had a baby without marriage. Neighbors also gossiped about me. My sister-in-law, in particular, is a shit stirrer (搅屎棍, it can be understood as trouble maker). She gossips about me, together with shit stirrer No. 1 and shit stirrer No. 2. Moreover, she asked her husband to kick me out of the family. They are inexperienced. Those rural women in my countryside, ah, always exaggerate other's private issues. My saving can cover the daily expenditure, I did not rely on my family at all. So I was not afraid of them.

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<sup>29</sup> This is a mixed use of the subject. According to my understanding of Chinese and my language usage habits, when stating a point of view or a story, using "you" instead of "I" as the subject allows the listener to better enter the speaker's perspective and the context.

<sup>30</sup> 'Just be alive', 活着就好, is a idiom of Chinese.

In the traditional gender ideology and rural areas, she and her baby are unacceptable. Breaking away from the shackles of traditional gender ideology, she chose to leave. She is now in the other county, taking care of her baby and living a peaceful life. Yuan's words further can reveal that economic independence can enhance women's power within their battle to the old gender ideology. Economic independence indeed can help her out when she contends with parents-in-law. She stated:

I found out that, if I want my mother-in-law to help me take care of my children, the best strategy is, just send my children to her place, and then just leave. It is pretty useful. Anyway, I'm going out to make money now. If she doesn't take care of my children, others will gossip about her, not me. That's it.

From her words, we can see that making money gives her more confidence to challenge the authority of her mother-in-law. And in the process of getting along with her mother-in-law for a long time, she knows to skillfully use the public opinion of the neighborhood to let her mother-in-law share some work. Economic independence is an important means for women to strengthen their status in the family. Other women also have already realized that the importance of economic independence, like Yue and Xiao.

In conversations, both Yue and Xiao mentioned their inferiority which stems from the economic dependence to their husbands. Xiao, a young lady from Zhaoqing, Guangdong province, 31 years old. She has 5 children (3 boys and 2 girls). When I first saw Xiao in the TikTok, she just gave birth to her fifth baby. She was still in *yuezi*<sup>31</sup> (postpartum confinement 坐月子) at that time. In China, women need to confine for one month after giving birth. At that time, she simply posted video to record her confinement. Weeks later, I noticed that Xiao started to do live streaming in TikTok. At the beginning, she was a little shy. During the live broadcast, she was simply answer questions from audiences; it was not long after I clicked into her live studio again, she began to engage with live commerce, selling goods like lipstick, diapers, aloe gel and so on. In our conversation afterward, she told me why she tried her best to be confident and make her feel comfortable to the camera. She said:

I feel inferior when I spend my husband's money. So I work hard in my TikTok. You see what I do in the broadcast. I cut my teeth to sell diapers, bottles and mobile phone holders in the live streaming. Many anti-fans would sneer, like 'without expectation, Xiao finally engage with the e-commerce'...I was like, their words are so ridiculous. It is no wrong to earn money.

Young lady Xiao has gained her initially success in fact. Although there are some anti-fans posted few unfriendly comments during her livestreaming, she did earn some money via

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<sup>31</sup> More information can be found in Wikipedia:  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Postpartum\\_confinement#:~:text=%22Sitting%20the%20month%22%3A%20%E5%9D%90,a nd%20feed%20the%20newborn%20baby.](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Postpartum_confinement#:~:text=%22Sitting%20the%20month%22%3A%20%E5%9D%90,a nd%20feed%20the%20newborn%20baby.)

TikTok. On contrary, Yue were not that kind of lucky. She is the eldest woman among my interviewees. During our conversation, she showed her subservient status inside the family due to no income. And she regretted that when she was young, she listened to her parents' words and moved back to the village after working in the digital factory for two years. Yue said,

My parents recalled me when I was around 20. They thought I should get married as young as possible. That's the mission of a woman. I...then came back...I do housework, take care of children and serve my mother-in-law every day. I have no economic income. I think my waist is not straight. I feel inferior. What I regret most now is that I didn't go to Beijing to work after graduating from high school. Many mates, who migrated to Beijing for work, have already settled down in Beijing. At the time, obtaining a high school degree is not that easy. I envy them.

Although Yue tried to find job in the local in order to change her plight, but for her, an over-50-year-old woman, it is hard to find a decent job, making her fail to empower herself. She added more detail to this:

You see, I cook for my little daughter every noon and evening. Then she went home to rest at noon. If I'm not at home, no one cooks for her. Like, someone told me some time ago, the nearby supermarket was recruiting cashiers. It required staff work from morning to afternoon. There is only an hour's rest at noon. I don't have time to cook for my daughter then. Um..., the day before yesterday, a friend told me that a barbecue stand was hiring some people to help them prepare foods. Staff could do it at home. Then, I went to the stand to ask for more information. Well, the working time is from 5 p.m. to middle night. This is not appropriate again.

Growth and marriage have promoted women to take more responsibility in terms of social reproduction. They have gradually abandoned the traditional gender ideology or values. And the economic independence will further empower their initiatives in terms of the social reproduction sphere.

### **Beyond the household: public support**

Outside the household, public institutions' roles in social reproduction also deserve our attention. I identified hospital and maternity insurance, education systems, and pension from interviews as three institutions that ensure social reproduction takes place successfully. In this section, I will elaborate on women's connection with these institutions.

#### ***Medical care insurance***

Procreation is an essential component of social reproduction; it ensures a sufficient labor supply for the future. A prenatal check-up is important to the health of both baby and mom. Then what kinds of interaction or relationships are there in terms of procreation? In Zhu's narration, she

uncovered the answer.

Zhu found out she was pregnant when she was in Shenzhen. To ensure everything was going well, she needed to accept the prenatal check-up every month during pregnancy. She once visited the hospital in Shenzhen and found that she needed to cover all the fees for a prenatal check-up as her insurance, namely *New Rural Cooperative Medical Care Insurance (NRCMCI)*<sup>32</sup>, did not support the reimbursement in urban hospitals. “In Shenzhen, the fee is 300 *yuan*. Whereas in my village, it is free. So, I just returned to the village. The fee in Shenzhen is too high.”

To make it explicit, I want to add some background information into Zhu’s narration. In China, if people holding NRCMCI want reimbursement after treatment in a hospital in other cities, there are some steps to follow. First, they need to get the official transfer form from the particular township hospital and then obtain the reference from the local medical insurance bureau to prove that the treatment from that hospital is necessary. After submitting both documents to that hospital, they could then benefit from the policy of reimbursement.

For rural migrant workers, unless their employers are willing to provide urban medical care insurance to them, they cannot directly benefit from the reimbursement without those procedures. However, Zhu’s employer did not offer her urban medical care insurance. More essentially, a regular prenatal check-up is not disease treatment. In this case, NRCMS cannot play a role in Zhu’s monthly health check in Shenzhen.

Failed to enjoy the healthcare welfare in Shenzhen, she finally moved back to the village and searched the free medical service in the town. Anyway, free prenatal check-ups and testing in township hospitals in her population registration place have ensured the success of her reproduction.

### ***Pension***

Similar to women’s dilemma in terms of medical care insurance which is the outcome of the dual population registration system, pension, as an essential financial support to the elderly, have also become a worry to women.

Women’s parents-in-law worked informally when they were young. Some elderlies used to work in the construction industry in cities (e.g., Zhong’s father-in-law); some elderlies have been farming for decades (e.g., Zhu’s parents-in-law). As informal labor and rural registration population, after retire (age 60), they can receive a pension from *New Type of Rural Social Endowment Insurance* scheme. That is the social security for them after retreating from the labor market. According to the evaluation of L. Wang, Béland, and Zhang (2014), the average yearly pension of a rural retiree is 943.77 *yuan*<sup>33</sup>, far less than an urban retiree.

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<sup>32</sup> *New Rural Cooperative Medical Care Insurance* is the insurance only provide to the rural registration population. Women can get free maternity checks in particular township hospitals in their registration place.

<sup>33</sup> Around 126 Euro.



In conversation with Yue, she showed that the social security from *the New Type of Rural Social Endowment Insurance* scheme was insufficient. In her view, the pension for rural people is too low to reduce the vulnerability of the household which is brought by diseases of the elderly. She sighed:

I worry every day now. What am I worried about? I don't worry about my daughter. Now I worry about the elderly, especially the elderly. We, holding rural *hukou*, are “three no people”, no job, no income, and no insurance. We only have that new rural cooperative medical system and a cheap endowment insurance.

### ***Schools***

Due to the scheme of compulsory education (age 7 to 15), rural children study skills and knowledge at schools during the daytime. It makes women probably have time to engage in productive works. And the expenditure for compulsory is low, zero tuition for 6-year primary school for age 7 to 12 and 3-year junior high school for age 13 to 15. It makes children accept education at a low cost. Further the state discounts fees of textbooks and that of meals to schools which located in some relatively poor areas. Ye's children are studying at this kind of “poverty alleviation school (扶贫小学)<sup>34</sup>”.

However, some women showed a bit anxious about the future. They have already concerned about the tuition fee after their children finishing their current studies. Ye's children perform excellently at school, and Ye thought her kids are proficient for the top junior high school in the city. However, that is a private school. Ye told me the expenditure is nearly 10,000 *yuan*<sup>35</sup> per year. She and her husband have felt the pressure. They wished their children get a better education and leave the village, so they continued to work together. Her husband continues to earn money in the urban to ensure that they can pay for better education; Ye is responsible for taking care of children to ensure that children can focus on their studies.

Education as an institution of social reproduction, it does undertake the responsibility to teach knowledge and skills and make children fit the need of society in the future. Free public education of primary school and junior high school has relieved the financial pressure of rural households, and it continues to benefit children in rural areas. Also, the education system makes it possible for women to withdraw a bit from the sphere of social reproduction. However, women who expect their children to accept more education after compulsory education were stimulated by their expectation to work constantly, as they were concerned about the education expenditure in the future.

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<sup>34</sup> Poverty Alleviation School program is a part of China's poverty alleviation policy.

<sup>35</sup> Around 1333 Euro.

## Conclusion

Before they stood at the center of the stage namely social reproduction, they passively accepted the assignment from family members. Returning to villages has brought them to the center and they turned to be the boss of social reproduction inside the household. More or less carrying equality idea, they thought that everyone has the responsibility to do reproductive works. Some women are lucky, their family members have a sense of cooperation, and they worked together as a team. But other women have encountered the traditional ideology of labor division inside the household. Among them, a part of women successfully empowered themselves by engaging in production to deal with the contradiction that other family members did not perceive the responsibility the same as she did. The other part is compromising to the old ideology due to various reasons. No matter how the tasks exactly are distributed, it is not denied fact that women are inclined to share responsibilities.

This research found that women would be determined to say goodbye to the city after discovering that the urban and rural health insurance systems were not equal. Due to high childbirth costs for rural people, they felt burdened without medical insurance which fits the reimbursement procedure. After returning to the countryside, they became the pillars of social reproduction at home, with the help of the state-built social security system, including compulsory education, education relief in poor and remote areas, free medical care at the grassroots level, and rural pensions system to achieve the goal of ensuring the smooth progress of reproduction. Even if women have some dissatisfaction with these institutions, in the social machinery, medical care, education, and pensions can indeed guarantee the social reproduction of the rural population.

## Chapter 7 Discussion and Conclusion

This study unifies gender and class of labor migration in the framework of capitalism through Social Reproduction Theory. It explored women's connection and interaction to social relations, contribution, and subjective feelings around social reproduction. The purpose is to emphasize the importance of women in the perpetuation of capitalism and to call for public attention to acknowledge women's contribution to labor migration.

In this chapter, I will summarize my research findings, and then I will interpret them and have a conversation with scholarships. Then I will propose the implications of my research and simultaneously give some suggestions for future research. At the end, I will wrap up this chapter by elaborating the limitations.

### Summary of research findings

When in urban areas, women were wage labor. What women needed to do were about reproducing themselves. However, after returning to villages, women had become pillars of their families in social reproduction. They currently act like servants, housekeepers, caregivers, cleaners, family teachers, and many others. For women, doing social reproductive work was no longer as simple as before.

Women's attitudes in terms of social reproduction have been ambivalent. I discovered mixing feelings. And their attitudes towards distinct social reproductive works were quite different. They not only frankly admitted their fatigue in the process of raising children but also recognized the sense of satisfaction brought about by raising children (Yuan, Er). Their attitudes towards caring for the elderly depended on their relationship with the elderly. Additionally, doing housework was quite tedious because they repeated to do similar works every single day (e.g., Zhong).

However, some women did not do too many social reproductive works at home (e.g., Biao). They could engage with production because their in-laws shared some social reproductive works (Biao, Xia). And their children have already reached school age (e.g., Ju, Biao, Yuan). Children were at school in the daytime, so women could have some time to do productive works.

Besides, although some women did not get help from their family members, they still could engage with production (e.g., Xu). These women did live streaming on TikTok. They sold goods during live streaming and got bonuses from TikTok, and their children just stayed beside them. Doing live streaming was quite flexible and convenient because they could take care of their children and earned money simultaneously (Ba, Xiao).

After returning to the village, women had tense emotional experiences around social reproduction. They would feel angry when their children being naughty. Then they might hit their children to teach lessons. Yet, when their children said sorry to them, they would feel guilty and then regret what they did to their kids (e.g., Er, Yuan). They would be impressed by making their children happy. They might feel annoyed when their in-laws made a complaint to

their husbands when women did not follow in-law's ways. Some women would choose to endure silently (Yue). Some women would move out and keep their distance from their in-laws (Yuan). However, some women would feel thankful to their in-laws at the moment that they realized those in-laws were old but still willing to offer help (Xia). As we have seen, they took different actions to cope with these feelings, no matter positive or negative.

In terms of responsibilities and relationships, when they were young, they passively accepted assignments from family members (e.g., Zhong). Their mothers would ask them to do something. Also, their parents would educate them into the housework type (e.g., Yue). When they were in urban, their responsibilities were to take care of themselves. Additionally, they have begun to transform a bit on their ideology. After that, their return brought them to the center of social reproduction inside the household. They thought that everyone had the responsibility to do reproductive works.

Additionally, when it came to relationships, women perceived relationships inside and outside their families. Inside the household, they lived with in-laws and their children. They co-worked with family members or worked independently to maintain the operation of the households. They got emotional and financial supports from husband. Women would use remittance to pay for the daily expenditures of households. Women also perceived their connection with social reproduction institutions, like medical care, education, and pension. Women would feel burdened without medical insurance that fitted the reimbursement procedure in urban, leading to the return (Zhu). Children accepted education at schools, so schools helped women to take care of their children in the daytime. Women have realized that pension is the social security for in-laws, and also the household. Although they thought pension in payment was low and inadequate (Yue).

## **Discussion**

After looking into the different dimensions of social reproduction, I have a clearer knowledge about women's position in China's market economy. And the research results place me and also this research in the center of several scholarship critiques. The very first critique that I can engage with is the political-system background of labor migration, dual population registration system.

### ***Hukou splits the social reproduction and production in labor migration***

In urban, women used to be wage labor. Their employers paid them a certain amount of salary, consisting of the payment for women's labor power and compensation for women's daily expenditure (Bhattacharya, 2017a; Marx, 2000). After work, they used the wage to consume goods and services for recreating themselves. And then, they sold it to their employers again for earning money. Although this kind of contract-based employment relationship seems that equal and reasonable, I found the discrimination in the production relationship, which was bred in the dual population registration system, has added a burden to women's reproduction.

The original aim of the establishment of a dual population registration system is for population management, taking it as a foundation to distribute the social resource between rural and urban people under the system of planned economy. However, with the introduction of capitalism and the boost of the market economy, this kind of population management system has led to a series of discrimination making migrant workers marginalized in the urban areas. Although either state or the policymakers have realized the shortcoming of this dual system, and they have tried to eliminate its negative impact, but still, in this research on the social reproduction of rural women, the flaws of this system were once again exposed.

The marginalized of migrant workers reflects in discrimination of employment (Song, 2014; Stainback & Tang, 2019; Xiang, 2007). That related to my research is that employers would not offer comprehensive staff insurance packages to migrant workers (Gao, Yang, & Li, 2012; Müller, 2016). Although some studies have found that it would threaten the reproductive capability of women, because, without valid medical insurance in urban, migrant workers could not afford the monthly prenatal check-up. But in my research, I noticed that the shortcoming of providing insufficient insurance would promote the internal spatial division of migrant workers' families. Searching for cheaper health services would push women back to the villages. The particular shortcoming of the population registration system for women reproducing offspring should be highlighted by more scholars. Moreover, the reform around this population registration system should be more thorough. Although scholars have consistently suggested the state to tackle this specific obstacle for women (Hesketh, Jun, Lu, & Mei, 2008; Müller, 2016), the systematic transformations around the population registration system, employment discrimination, and dual-system insurance (rural and urban) were not sufficient. There is still a long way to go in terms of transforming the Chinese population registration system.

### ***Women and patriarchy: money matters***

Women's initial perception of gender ideology came from their exposure to the value of parents. Some women passively accepted social reproductive "homework" from their mothers. Their brothers can be exempted from social reproduction responsibility only because they are male. Also, their parents would educate women into good women, who were good at doing housework. However, in the process of labor migration, with the change of ideology, they began to more or less deny the traditional patriarchal family division of labor. In the context of my research, in 15 spatial split families, the focus of patriarchal gender ideology is no longer the gender labor division inside the household.

On the one hand, we see how migrant workers' households positioned social reproduction and production within the patriarchal social system. The labor distribution between men and women and low-class identity in the patriarchal social system support the spatial division of social reproduction and production in current Chinese labor migration. Through the arrangement that settling the main reproduction unit (family) in rural areas, migrant workers' families could ensure that they could not only maintain reproduction smoothly but also a certain income. Husbands in urban areas worked actively in different industries, contributing to China's.

Meanwhile women stay behind the scenes of the China's market economy.

Furthermore, A lot of battles were conducted around the labor division around two generations, between women and their parents-in-law. I would like to argue that, as one component of patriarchy, this kind of cross-generation labor division also deserves our attention. On the one hand, the intergenerational division of labor in the patriarchal family system determines how to further deal with the relationship between production and reproduction within the family (the part that is located in the village). That is related to whether women could engage with production sphere again after the return. I found that women who dealt with the intergenerational division of labor peacefully might return to the sphere of production and become the labor force in rural areas.

On the other hand, this study reveals the current situation of women's struggle, entanglement, and coexistence with the old division of labor in rural families. These women challenged the traditional patriarchal family in China, which is reflected in the continuous cross-generational struggle. As the stages of social reproduction, their houses had witnessed the struggle between the old and new gender ideology every day. Chinese traditional patriarchal families would require young women to follow the instructions of the older generation and should serve them (Chen, 2004; Du, 2013). In the research, we see that the idea "to sharing housework" formed by women after the migration has challenged the ideology of the Chinese traditional patriarchal family. When women realized that they had a conflict around the division of labor of their parents-in-law, they would try to get rid of the shackles of the traditional patriarchal division of labor through economic empowerment. Economic empowerment enables women to have, what Han (2020) called in her research, bargain power. In the course of the battle, we could see women would have their strategies to deal with different kinds of conflicts and their emotions emerged from those. For example, they would utilize neighborhood public opinion to make the older generation share some works (e.g., Yuan). However, some women who have not achieved economic independence would be inferior (Xiao, Yue). It would undermine their bargain power. In the traditional patriarchal family, they choose to compromise.

In the battle with patriarchy, I have witnessed that money matters in empowering women. As social reproduction, unpaid labor namely, is not evaluate by money, resulting that even though women has put plenty of effort in social reproduction, their contribution would not be perceived "valuable", in some families. Invisible effort of social reproduction, unlike the money they earn via productive activities, will not empower women and making women has more bargain power inside the family. It reveals the side effect of the unpaid nature of social reproductive works (Qi & Dong, 2016; Tasnim, 2020; UN Women, 2020). Besides, the nature of unpaid also was manifested in social reproductive works transfer. Transferring reproductive works without payment among family members is still the most prevalent way to relieve the social reproduction burden (Shah & Lerche, 2020). As the ones who stay in villages, they would be the receivers of the transfer. They help their relatives to take care of their children to make sure relatives can work in the urban (Er, Ye).

### ***Technology creates more possibility***

Unexpected research findings of TikTok inspired me to reflect on technology, social reproduction, and capitalism. TikTok is a flexible way to earn money for many women. It seems that TikTok's business model did not run in the same as the traditional factories. Women have the power to decide when to start live broadcasting anytime, anywhere as long as they can access the network. It seems that women's income would be higher if they act more actively and sell more goods in live streaming. Also, no visible manager will monitor women's performance and force them to finish a certain amount of workload within a limited timeslot. But under this model, the dark side underneath this kind of success makes women who do not profit from it feel frustrated. Because invisibly, women are regulated by TikTok's incentive model which is rooted in its Algorithm, for example, setting a minimum time for broadcast. Unlike the traditional piecework wage system and hourly wage system, it will manipulate the audiences in women's live streaming and further has an impact on women's bonuses by selling goods. TikTok has formed a more uncertain, unknown incentive model for broadcasters, stimulating women to invest more time and performed more actively in TikTok. However, it then leads to the other end, doing harm to women's balance of production and reproduction and then making women quit TikTok live streaming.

### ***Have a wider conversation***

If we put this research in a broader context of labor migration and capitalism, it is not difficult to find some similarities and differences. The first is the care crisis in the global south. In labor migration, people from lower class face the heavier double pressure, as women from lower class need to bear double oppression alone in the care chain (Hester & Srnicek, 2017). In my research, I found that China's patriarchal system has deepened women's double pressures. But unlike other women in the global South, the motivation for my research subjects to actively engage in productive activities is not poverty (Stevano, Mezzadri, Lombardozzi, & Bargawi, 2021), but empowering themselves in an attempt to win the struggle against patriarchy.

In addition, in the writing of Vogel (1983), she advocated united patriarchy into the system of capitalism. She refuted the idea of dual systems that capitalism and patriarchy are two parallel forces leading to women's oppression which directly attacked the thought of Engels (2010). In the process of my research, I discovered that Chinese male power plays an extremely important role in gender. However, unlike capitalist countries, the origin of China's patriarchy is closely linked to the 5000-year history of China's feudal dynasties and the long history of Confucianism. Unlike capitalist countries such as Britain and the Netherlands (Wood, 2002), China's history of capitalism is much shorter. In terms of social reproduction, how to deal with the relationship between the patriarchy which grew up in both the feudal dynasty and Confucian culture and the current capitalism in China's context remains to be discussed. The discussion around this has been initially unfolded. In the relevant research on the development of neoliberalism in China, some scholars have already explored neoliberalism in China has led to the state's retreat in social welfare. This retreat has, in recent years, driven more women

home and strengthened the patriarchal order in Chinese society (Hu, 2018; Ji et al., 2017). While, in terms of SRT itself, how to deal with this question might trigger broad discussion about the historical materialist nature of the theory.

### **Implications**

Via this research, I have an opportunity to build wide communication with my reading of labor migration, women's social reproduction, and Marxism. Their gender ideology has been changed. They performed more modern; they embarked on the novel technology. They have their own strategies to re-embed to the rural. Being women from the lower class and being women in patriarchal society and family. Women's change within labor migration has been shown.

This research provides a feminist theoretical perspective to study labor migration and urbanization in China. This research has placed women as the center, both at macro-level (the united of urban and rural) and micro-level (family), and highlights their experiences in capitalism by exploring women's perspectives of different dimensions of social reproduction. By doing so, this research also built up a conversation with the current SRT study of labor migration. These Chinese women shared a similar experience with other women but there are differences due to different social reproduction systems and gender ideology.

In prior studies about the dynamic between social reproduction and reproduction, as work from the home policy has been more and more popular, scholars have attached attention to the reality that telecommuting would lead to the overlap of space and time of social reproduction and that of production (James, 2020). My research has opened up a bit of the discussion on TikTok e-commerce and to argue such a business model might also lead to the similar circumstance of work from home policy. In the future, it is possible and interesting to explore the reasons that TikTok e-commerce has accidentally brought about the overlap, what the outcomes are, and how female broadcasters perceive it. It would further expand the current research of social reproduction by connecting it to the new business model and technology. And it could promote more empirical evidence to social reproduction theory and stimulate scholars to further develop it at a theoretical level, helping us to develop new knowledge about the operation of capitalism.

In terms of practical implications, it can encourage more people to give more attention to women's dilemmas in both villages and the course of labor migration. Recently, China government has taken several practices to encourage rural women to participate in production, for instance, by providing working opportunities, organizing skills workshops, encourage rural women to start their businesses (Chongqing Municipal People's Government, 2021; Guizhou Ribao, July 13, 2017). However, this research has set alarm to policymakers that more support from social reproduction institutions is necessary for successfully empower women, otherwise women may be overwhelmed in balancing production and reproduction. Fortunately, The Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China (2021) has practiced several strategies in major cities to relieve women's pressure, including reducing reproduction costs, longer prenatal and maternal holidays, prolonging the open time of schools. It is great that the



state has realized the importance of social reproduction, and the state has felt the urgency to make some changes to reduce the burden on social reproduction. However, the specific strategy for rural women has not yet been published. We have a long way to go for solving women's dilemma. And also, the practice should acknowledge the different dilemmas of rural women and urban women. This research will give inspiration to policymakers about providing different packages to rural women and urban women as their dilemmas are not the same.

At last, this research has recorded how women function in the operation of the family. I hope more people can recognize the effort that has been put into social reproduction. In the course of labor migration, when we talk about migrant workers' contribution to China's development, we should also recognize that left-behind women are the heroes of China's development as well.

### **Limitations**

Although the definition of social reproduction from Laslett and Brenner (1989) provided a conceptual framework to develop sub-research questions and a guideline to collect data, I did not collect adequate data related to emotions and behaviors that happened years ago. I conclude these reasons: 1) Some women have already returned to the village over 10 years. It was hard for them to recall their emotions and behaviors. And they more likely could recall and tell me current stories; 2) I selected unstructured interviews as the method to collect data. Although most of the interviews lasted about one hour, it may result in failing to collect data as much as possible due to limited interview duration. Around this, in the future, if researchers have sufficient time to conduct the onsite fieldwork, they may have the chance to collect more information from informants. In addition, the weakness of unstructured interviews was exposed. I also learned lessons from this research, in the case that the fieldwork was time-limited and remote, a more structured interview method will work better.

Second, I took left-behind women with migration experience as my research subjects and collect data from them, because I was more interested in the transformation of women themselves. However, it is also possible to collect data from two different groups of people, left-behind women with migration experience, and left-behind women without migration experience. By comparing their narrations, researchers could also explain how migration influences their perceptions. By doing so, researchers may have some different but also interesting findings.

Third, I did a purpose sample in TikTok which led to a limitation related to sample profile. It has added one more characteristic to my informants, which is that they were TikTok users. It may blur my research population. Are they left-behind women with migration experience or those who also used TikTok? However, I would like to insist on my original motivation for this research and would not adjust the term that refers to my informants. It is also because digital devices can easily be accessed in rural China. It would be redundant if I named them returned left-behind women who use TikTok.

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## Appendixes

### Annex 1 Interview Guide

Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Preparation:

Self-introduction and a brief introduction to the project.

Inform the interview consent.

Question guide:

- *The question guide is just an example about how I am going to phrase the question and I will not ask those questions that they have already answer when they narrate the stories.*
- *I will use this guide to remind me tie the conversation closely to the theme.*
- *The interview will be done in Mandarin or local dialects, such as Cantonese, Hakka, Southwestern Mandarin, because some rural women do not master fluence Mandarin. During the interview, questions will be sense-for-sense translated into the language that I use in order to fit the dialogue context.*
- *The interview requires them to compare their life before and after migration. Various interviewees will narrate their stories in different logical sequences. I assume that there will be mainly three sequences: from the past to the present; from the present to the past; the present and the past mixed. Therefore, I will ask the questions flexibly.*

Activities and Attitudes:

Could you please describe your typical day to me? For example, what do you do and at what time?

(After they finish the description, I will tell them what activities I will focus on)

What is your favor level for doing these works?

For you, what is the value of doing these works?

*(Actually, their attitude and emotion can be perceived during the narration by her facial expression, tone and words.)*

Emotions and Behaviors:

What are you feeling as you do those?



What are your responses to different emotion?

Responsibilities and Relationships:

Does anyone else do these at home as well?

In your view, why are you responsible for these works?

Who has the responsibility to do these works?

Why do they have the responsibility to do these works?

## **Annex 2 Informed Consent**

The interview will take about 45 minutes.

### **Introduction:**

The research is conducted by Bin Liang, the master student at Wageningen University, and is supervised by Mindi Schneider. This research aims to know your understanding around domestic works that you do every day, such as cooking, cleaning, offer caring, farming, washing clothes, for this reason I seek your support. The focus is on your experience and understanding before you migrated to the urban and after you moved back to the village. In the interview, you can master the pace and share whatever you want to share with me.

### **Informed Consent:**

The information you share will only be used in this research.

Your participation in this interview is entirely voluntary.

In the course of the interview, you may come up with something not so good that happened in the past. You can stop or abort the interview at any time. Please let me know and I will end the interview. Please feel free to alert me.

If you prefer not to answer a question, or to skip it, but still continue with the interview, there is no problem. We can just skip it and continue with the interview.

I will be taking notes during our discussion, however, your identity and responses and this discussion will remain confidential. The notes will be stored safely without identifying details.

Do you agree with the above statements for the purposes of this interview, and give your consent to proceed?

• Yes:

• No:

Which way do you prefer that I record our conversation?

• Voice recorded by my phone

• Only pen-record key words

In the thesis report, I will present your basic information to make my readers have a brief idea about the live of left-behind women. Your name and TikTok ID will be remain confidential. Do you agree to let me disclosure your basic information (e.g.: age, location, migration history, household structure, etc.) in my report?

• Yes:

• NO:

*(Attention: Due to COVID-19, all interviews were done online. I guarantee that I have announced above content to my interviewees. Only after gaining the oral informed consent or confirm message through WeChat, the interview would then begin.)*

**Annex 3 List of interviewees**

<i>No.</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>Location/province</i>	<i>Date of interview</i>	<i>Period in urban</i>	<i>Type of job in urban</i>	<i>Current job</i>
1	Biao	Guangxi	January 10, 2021	2007-2009	factory worker	Graph business
2	Xu	Guizhou	January 19, 2021	2006-2016	factory worker/sole trader	TikToker
3	Ye	Guangxi	January 19, 2021	2008-2009	factory worker	/
4	Yue	Hebei	January 21, 2021	1995-1996; 2002-2003	factory worker/insurance sales	/
5	Zhu	Henan	January 21, 2021	2017-2018	factory worker	/
6	Yuan	Jiangsu	January 24, 2021	2008-2010	factory worker/waitress	Part-time (in insurance)
7	Xiao	Guangdong	January 25, 2021	2009-2011	factory worker	TikToker
8	Ling	Hubei	January 28, 2021	2011-2014	factory worker	/ (has quit TikTok)
9	Ju	Guangxi	January 31, 2021	2005-2007	factory worker	/
10	Jia	Guizhou	February 02, 2021	2009-2013	supermarket worker	TikToker

11	Xia	Guangxi	February 04, 2021	2009-2015	factory worker	Street vendor
12	Er	Guangxi	February 04, 2021	2011-2014	factory/supermarket/clothing store	Teacher in a kindergarten
13	Zhong	Guangxi	February 05, 2021	2008-2015	factory worker/supermarket front desk	/
14	Youer	Guangdong	February 09, 2021	2013-2014	factory worker	/
15	Ba	Guangxi	February 13, 2021	2009-2019	real estate agent/financial production sales	TikToker (sometimes)

Note: TikToker means doing live streaming in TikTok for earning money.